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ABSTRACT

Six urban school districts (Chattanooga, Tennessee, Corpus Christi, Texas, Long Beach, California, Louisville, Kentucky, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and San Diego, California) have been pursuing standard-based reform at the middle school level accepting systemic reform as the norm. This report provides descriptions of their approaches, and commentary on the lessons they are learning in the process. The six districts have set content and performance standards under broad guidelines from the Clark Foundation, but they are pursuing reforms to suit their own needs and capacities. The documentation and commentary in this report was gathered over 18 months during several visits to one school in each district, a school selected for special help because of poor academic results. These focus schools are examples of efforts throughout each district, and they provide a closeup of the classrooms in which middle school teachers are trying to transform learning and teaching for students who need such changes the most. (SLD)

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# FIGURING IT OUT

## STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS IN URBAN MIDDLE GRADES

ANNE C. LEWIS *WITH SURVEY BY EARNETTA BERRY*

# FIGURING IT OUT: STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS IN URBAN MIDDLE GRADES

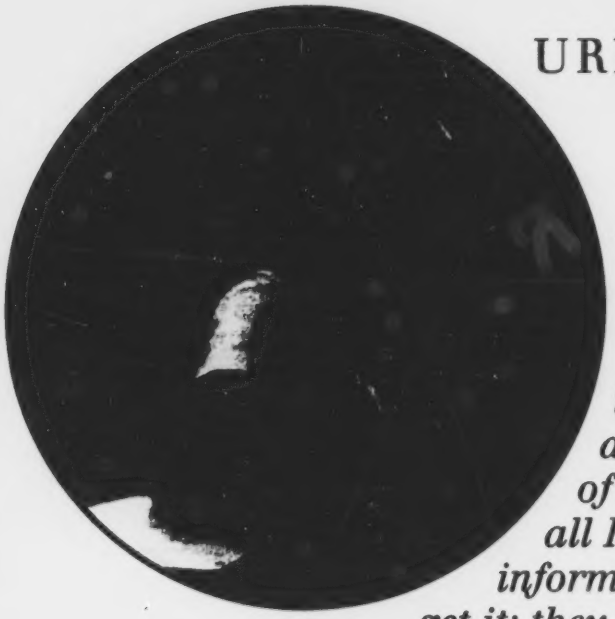
ANNE C. LEWIS

WITH SURVEY BY BARNETT BERRY

THE EDNA MCCONNELL CLARK FOUNDATION

# FIGURING IT OUT

## STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS IN URBAN MIDDLE GRADES



*We want everybody to come out of the sixth grade knowing the same things and being able to achieve the same things. That's what standards are really all about... A lot of times you think: 'I have done all I can. I've taught them this information and they just don't get it; they didn't pay attention.' But if that happens with the performance standard model, then you are back to the drawing board. You have to face the fact that you didn't teach it... So your job is not over. You are continually collecting feedback on your students' performance, and you keep feeding what you learn back into your own thinking and teaching.*

—Margaret Lawrence, sixth-grade language arts teacher
Meyzeek Middle School, Louisville, Kentucky

**ANNE C. LEWIS** is an education policy writer who has documented the Clark Foundation's investment in urban middle grades reform since 1989. This is her fourth book for the Foundation. She is also a national columnist for Phi Delta Kappan and writes frequently on education policy issues for a number of national education groups and other foundations.

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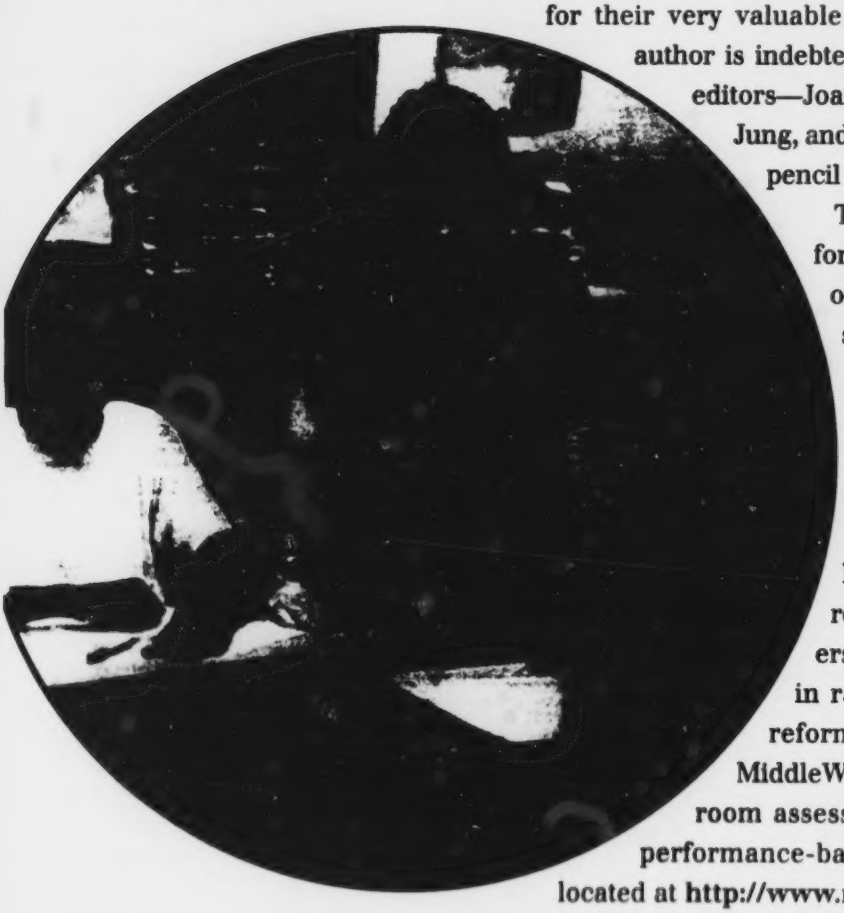
It is the hope of this writer that the extraordinary people who contributed stories for this book know how much their conversations with the author were appreciated. They courteously gave much time to a stranger. Their insights are the core of the book. If readers are helped in any way, it is because the people in the schools and districts helped the author understand their work and their passion. The author also wants to thank Education Matters, Inc., and the Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy for their very valuable resources. Most important, the author is indebted to a support group of excellent editors—Joanne Edgar, Barnett Berry, Minna Jung, and Anne MacKinnon—for their blue-pencil guidance and high standards.

The Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement and Office of Communications support a Web site, Middleweb, devoted to topics of urban middle school reform, including the implementation of academic standards in the six school districts funded by the Foundation. Middleweb provides links, resources, and original reporting for middle school teachers, parents, and others interested in raising student achievement and reforming middle grades education. MiddleWeb offers a special focus on classroom assessment, academic standards, and performance-based teaching. The site can be located at http://www.middleweb.com.



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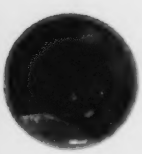

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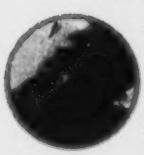

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FOREWORD

# BEGINNING WITH STUDENTS

Charles always signs his e-mail with roses. "Do you like pink ones?" he asks. He then tells me the flowers he makes—each one an @ followed by a parentheses and many dashes, like long-stemmed roses lying on their sides in a gift box—are pink and meant to make me happy.

"That's just like Charles," his sixth-grade language arts teacher, Judy Lyons, tells me. She knows this gangly, quiet youngster well, one of many reluctant learners she has struggled to reignite at East Lake Middle School in Chattanooga. Charles Husted, 14, was unaccustomed to the demands this soft-spoken teacher placed on him. She was really strict," he recalls from his now seventh-grade perspective. Fifth grade, his last year in elementary school, he remembers as "just sitting there and getting bored," and seventh-grade schoolwork hasn't engaged or challenged him. "But we had to write a lot in Mrs. Lyons' class. She made us read stuff and write about what we read and do analogies. I learned a lot more than I expected to."

Lyons succeeded in setting standards for Charles, but today he seems to be slipping away from those expectations. Seventh grade started well, but "Charles just went kaput," says his math teacher, who admits he doesn't know how to turn this young student around again. Charles' math and language arts teachers both describe him as "lazy." Maybe there are problems at home or in the neighborhood, they guess, but for whatever reason, Charles is only interested in getting by even though he is capable of

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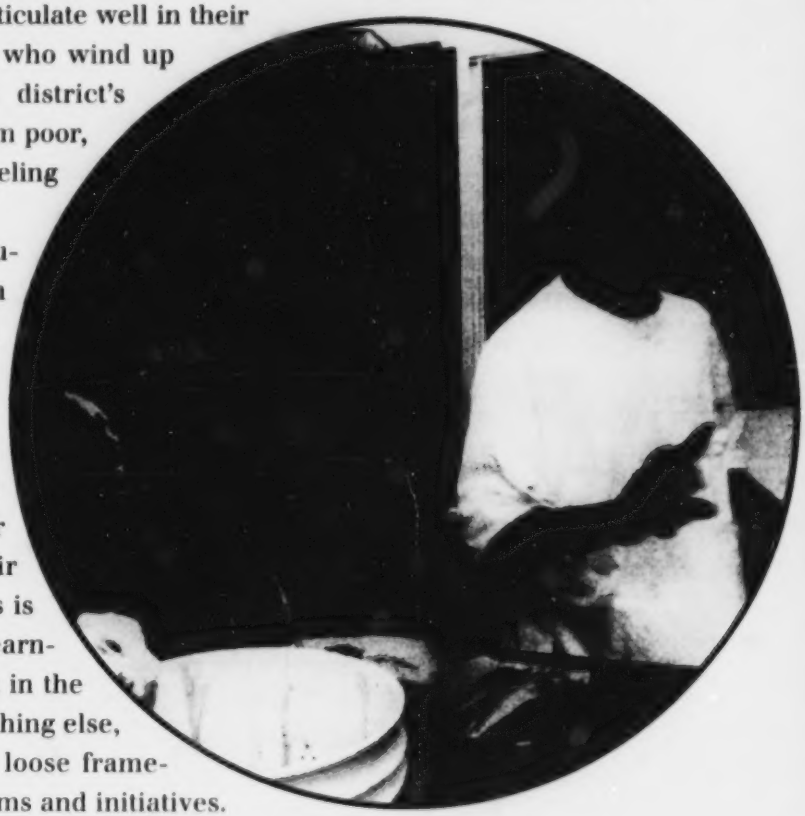
doing very good work. He is careless about turning in homework on time. He empathizes with his friends when they get angry and say they won't ever go to school again. Still, "they're always there the next day," just as he is, hanging in there but not sure why.

What does Charles want from his teachers? Without hesitating, he says "they ought to be smart." Then it would be nice if they would give him help when he needs it, and, finally, "they shouldn't yell at you so much." He had looked forward to the middle grades because, unlike elementary school, "if a teacher here is mad at the class, you can get out of there in an hour. You don't have to sit there all day." Charles rarely expresses such feelings to anyone at school. He is not a troublemaker—in fact, teachers consider him atypical among East Lake students because "he doesn't act up." He has learned to keep to himself, and to expect from his school about as much as the school expects of him. He is the kind of student, Lyons fears, who could easily slip through the cracks.

Teachers and principals in urban middle grades across the country know many students like Charles. Darrell, a seventh grader at Franklin Middle School in Minneapolis, spends his days goofing off and trying to keep his belt from slipping off his hips. He accepts detentions for inattention as a regular part of the school day. A group of seventh-grade girls in Tom Carnes' history class at Pershing Middle School in San Diego choose to sit at the back of the room where they can twist their hair and test provocative poses without much notice from their teacher. Then there are the "little ones" in Diamentina Hinojosa's seventh-grade math class at South Park Middle School in Corpus Christi. If she

calls on them, they usually know the answers unless they have lost the flow of the classroom discussion because they have been whispering about who is going out with whom. They nominally follow the rules but are falling further and further behind.

These students, no matter where they live, frustrate teachers, drag down school achievement scores, and seem to be uncoupling themselves, like poorly launched rockets, from the base they need to propel them into high school, to a diploma, and to a decent future. They can be funny and exasperating, warm and disturbingly distant. They know a lot more than they can articulate well in their writing. These are the students who wind up in the "bottom quartile" of a district's achievement scores—most of them poor, of color, and, to quote Charles' feeling about school, bored.



This book is about those students and efforts in a half-dozen urban districts to keep them from falling into that bottom quartile. The ultimate goal of these districts is that all students leave the middle grades well prepared for any academic options their high schools may offer. Their major tool for accomplishing this is standards-based teaching and learning. They may not all define that in the same way. They may focus on nothing else, or they may use standards as a loose framework for a host of diverse programs and initiatives.

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# MIDDLE SCHOOL REFORM IN CONTEXT

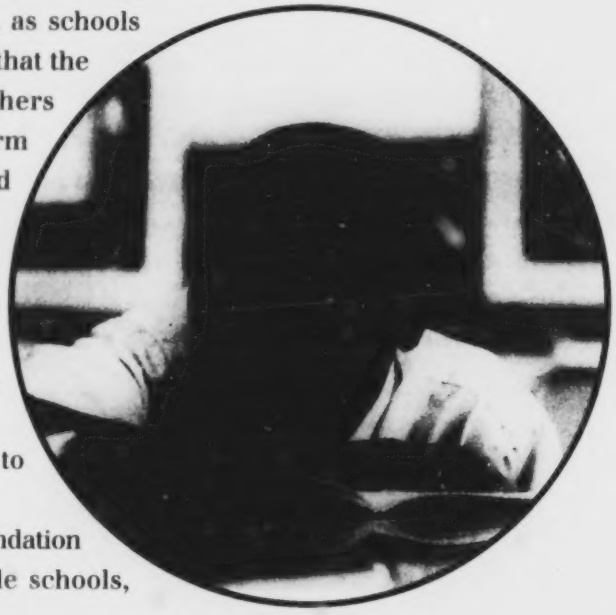
For almost two decades, reforming public education in this country has been akin to peeling an onion. Reform efforts began with the most visible but paper-thin objective—use of students' academic time—through calls for longer school days and years and greater attention to academic core subjects. Reforms have subsequently dealt with more complex problems, peeling away at the issues of what is being taught, how it is being assessed, how schools are organized to support higher learning, and, finally, the quality of teaching. These issues are separate but also interdependent in shaping a redesign of public education.

Each layer revealed greater complexity. Longer time in school and different courses required no one, not even students, to change much more than their schedules. Developing standards—and assessments to go with them—cut more deeply into practices and beliefs, involved a wide range of people, and began to open up teaching and school organizations to doing things differently. Yet the picture was not complete until current reforms put teachers' ability to teach in a standards-based classroom at the center of their efforts. Reaching this layer has not made reforms easier. In fact, as Richard Elmore of the Harvard University Graduate School of Education notes, "reforms that reach deeply into teaching and learning are complex, hard to develop, and even harder to implement."

Today, a focus on teaching and learning runs through almost all statements about education reform from any number of research initiatives, foundation-supported reforms, and state and/or local efforts. After years of building the component parts, the framework—excellent teaching—surrounds everything else. Within that framework, there is a consensus on the various parts.

Safe environments are basic and essential. In various surveys, safety has replaced discipline as the major concern of parents. It is certain to remain at the top because of recent horrendous events in schools once thought immune from violence. Yet teachers, administrators, and parents also strongly agree about what students should learn and how well they should learn it. The process of setting such standards must be well-informed by knowledge of what students are capable of achieving. Teachers and principals need to take responsibility for making sure all students within a school meet local standards as well as external standards set by districts/states. They need to work collaboratively on that goal. Their professional development must focus on what teachers need to know to help students reach the standards. Teachers must also integrate assessments into the curriculum and their instruction, and they need to base these assessments on the agreed-to standards.

Another key element of success is building the practices and support that sustain reforms over time. Researchers for the RAND Corp., a nonprofit research and analysis institution, reinforced this point in their study of the expansion (or "scaling up") of models promoted by New American Schools, a privately funded project started under President George Bush to support innovative designs for school reform. RAND zeroed in on the importance of political and personal support for reform, both in schools and in the district, as schools decided which design to adopt. They found that the more successful systems made sure teachers thoroughly understood the different reform models, encouraged a culture of trust and autonomy, and enjoyed a measure of stability during the start-up period. Most of all, RAND confirms that there is no easy route to reforms that last. Substantive change is difficult. It is often tenuous and requires sustained, systemic support.



The documentation in this book comes to many of the same conclusions.

Since 1989, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation has worked to improve education in middle schools,

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primarily those serving low-income children in urban districts. The Foundation selected this emphasis because the middle grades, literally, are poor children's last hope for success. During the pre-adolescent years, roughly ages 11 to 15, most young people begin to form long-range goals for themselves. Some decide to not even try. Low-performing students, denied entrance to magnet schools and special programs that flourish in public education at the middle-grades level, are too often shunted into schools and classrooms that perpetuate low expectations and poor teaching. Needing to catch up, they instead fall further behind. Moreover, health and education statistics reveal that some of the problems of older adolescents—especially drugs, dropping out, and depression—are pushing their way into the lives of younger and younger students.

Between 1989 and 1994, the Foundation worked with five urban school districts—Baltimore, Louisville, Milwaukee, Oakland, and San Diego—committed to "high content, high expectations, high support" for their middle-grades students. Each district focused on two or three schools, a strategy they hoped would influence other middle schools and the district office to adopt reforms. These "three highs," if implemented well, would allow students to enter high school prepared for all academic options. Over the course of the project, national statistics about the middle-grades population grew grimmer. International studies affirmed serious problems with our nation's academic standards in these grades. The gaps in achievement between white and minority students, which had gradually narrowed during the 1970s and early 1980s, began to widen again. The growing teacher shortage and its consequences, such as emergency certifications and out-of-field teaching, severely affected schools serving low-income students.

The Foundation's initial five-year initiative revealed stubborn conditions that undermined reform efforts. Only two of the original five districts made genuine, systemic progress at school reform. Lack of vision and organizational capacity weighed too heavily in the other districts; two of these districts have since been threatened with state takeovers. The Foundation learned some difficult lessons from the initiative, primarily that reforms need a firmer "hook" rather than general goals if they were to result in high student achievement.

A second round of projects began in 1994 with six districts, this time specifically focused on academic standards. Two districts—Louisville and San Diego—built on their previous experience with the Foundation's middle-grades program. Two others—Corpus Christi and Long Beach—were already deeply involved in standards-based reforms. The

remaining districts—Chattanooga and Minneapolis—were seeking school improvement while at the same time engaging in structural changes. Chattanooga was preparing for an anticipated merger of city and county schools, and Minneapolis was striving to cope with educational inequities caused by rapidly changing demographics. All of the states were developing content standards for students as required by several federal programs, especially Title I, or their own state reform plans. These conditions created an opportunity to improve urban middle-school outcomes in a standards-based environment.

The Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement is about much more than understanding what standards-based reforms are all about. Many reform efforts end there. Understanding, says organizational change researcher Chris Argyris of Harvard University, means nothing unless it leads to action and desired results. At the end of the Foundation's first initiative in 1994, most staff members in the participating districts had moved to the point of understanding the need for change. Results beyond that were sometimes extraordinary but also sporadic, and most did not last long.

The six districts in the current initiative accept systemic reform as the norm. They have set content standards (the what of learning) and performance standards (the expectations for how well students learn the content) for all students. They are trying to make sure teachers have the skills and principals the leadership capacity to implement standards-based reforms. They are laboratories for the challenges, the difficulties, and the victories of standards-based reform. Their most compelling stories are in the classrooms, where policies and best intentions play out—and students either have, or are denied, the chance to meet standards that allow them to graduate from the middle grades ready for the next step in their lives.

# SIX DISTRICTS, SIX APPROACHES TO STANDARDS

Standards-based middle-school reform challenges two widely held assumptions: one, about how teachers acquire deeper knowledge of their work in classrooms; the other, about the unique purposes of the middle grades.

According to the first assumption, classroom standards develop from intrinsic experiences of individual teachers who reflect on student work and then pull from that work an understanding of the abilities and skills of their students as well as how to take them to higher levels. Top-down standards don't work, proponents of this view contend.

The second assumption holds that middle schools should focus on their students' emotional, physical, and psychological development, putting less emphasis on academic learning than is traditionally found in the high-school environment. Because of their age, preadolescents have unique learning and social needs, say the mainstream middle-school reformers who subscribe to this view.

Standards-based reform, as interpreted by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement, does not completely discard either of these assumptions, but it does question their adequacy for framing what should happen for students in the middle grades.

## STANDARDS COME FIRST

Certainly, teachers who are creating standards-based classrooms must be reflective about their instruction and realize they are as much learners as their students. Ruth Mitchell, a

standards and assessment expert with the Washington-based reform initiative, The Education Trust, insists that examining student work is actually a process of examining teachers' work because students can do no better than what teachers set out for them to learn. The problem with expecting teachers to reflect on their and their students' work, and then create a sequential curriculum keyed to high academic expectations, is twofold. Urban middle-grades teachers are trapped in systems more invested in remedial than high-level work. Moreover, few teachers at any level are prepared to teach a high-content curriculum or able to assess their students' learning in a standards-based classroom.

In the best of all possible worlds, middle schools would be staffed only by exemplary teachers with preparation, experience, and access to good professional development. In addition, the teachers would possess the research-based knowledge to look at their students' work, know if it meets the standards for good work or why it doesn't, and develop appropriate strategies for learning for each student. They would collaborate across grade levels and curriculum areas to avoid repetition and enrich all learning. Such teachers would be thoroughly familiar with "content-specific pedagogy," the particular skills they need to teach their own subject area.

In urban schools, such teaching is rare. True learning communities are difficult to create in large bureaucracies and among teachers who tend to be the least experienced— the most likely to be teaching out-of-field, and confounded by enormous differences in the abilities of their students.

From their isolated vantage, most urban middle-grades teachers would find it frustrating, if not impossible, to begin conversations with each other about what students should know based on well-researched benchmarks, much less to determine how well they know it—without standards as a guide. Those who say strong standards will develop from teachers' own knowledge and understanding of student work may justifiably be confident of urban teachers' capacities to learn but woefully over-optimistic about their preparation and the opportunities they have for professional growth.

This is not to imply that standards must come to teachers already shrink-wrapped. State standards and assessments as well as standards developed by national subject-area groups certainly influenced the content standards adopted by the six Clark districts. In all of the districts, however, committees of teachers, administrators, and parents (and sometimes college and business representatives) participated in the process of deciding what students should know. In those districts that set standards for certain points in

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schooling and not at each grade, teachers in each school worked through the process of deciding what students should be learning by grade level. Both district and school committees sought feedback. When the time came to set performance standards and tasks based on the content standards, each district relied on teachers to develop and pilot test them; to create the rubrics, or criteria, for assessment; and to score district assessments.

## IN CERTAIN TERMS

**CONTENT STANDARD**
specifies what students should know in various subject areas. Some Clark districts define standards by grade level; some lump the middle grades together, setting standards specifically for "the middle grades."

**EXAMPLE: A geometry content standard for the middle grades, Long Beach, California**

Students will study one-, two-, and three-dimensional figures in a variety of situations to represent, analyze, and solve problems through the use of concrete models.

**PERFORMANCE STANDARD**
describes how well students are expected to know the content. Performance standards specify the format students will use, such as an essay or a scientific experiment, as well as what knowledge they need to demonstrate.

EXAMPLE: **Grade 8 Social Studies Performance Standard, Jefferson County (KY) Public Schools.**

The student analyzes the relationship between rights and responsibilities of individuals/groups and the needs of society. In order to meet this performance standard, the student: ◆ understands concepts of individual human dignity, liberty, justice, equality, and the common good; ◆ identifies the specific rights granted to American citizens in the Bill of Rights; ◆ identifies limits on rights granted to American citizens; ◆ recognizes the responsibilities, both legal (paying taxes, obeying laws) and voluntary (voting, participating in civic groups) of citizens; and ◆ understands reasons why societies want order, security, conflict management, and the rule of law.

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**RUBRIC, OR SCORING GUIDE**

tells students (and teachers) what they need to do to attain certain levels of performance, usually in numerical levels (say, 1 to 6) or descriptions (such as novice to advanced).

EXAMPLE. **A rubric for scoring the performance task shown below**

6 points = **Distinguished Achievement.** The student draws a graph with profoundly different parameters, such as beginning the y-axis at 2 million and ending it at 3 million with intervals of hundred thousands. The student presents a graph that is labeled precisely with accurately recorded data. The explanation describes why his or her graph is more effective than the original graph. Another example is given which shows the student's understanding. 5 points = **Noteworthy Achievement.** The student draws a graph similar in effect to the example, but it may lack the profound skew or the preciseness of the overall design. The explanation clearly explains the effectiveness of the graph. Another example may or may not be given. 4 points = **Satisfactory Achievement.** The student draws an effective graph (skewed), although it may not be accurately labeled. The explanation of the effectiveness of the graph may be flawed or weak in addressing all three points. Another example may or may not be given. 3 points = **Indication of Achievement.** The student draws a graph, but it lacks the accuracy and effectiveness of 4-, 5-, and 6-point papers. The student may just reproduce the original graph with little change. There is no change in the parameters, or the parameters are not effective. The explanation is limited or may have an inaccurate account of why his or her graph is more effective than the original. There is a limited explanation or validation of changing the scale. Another example may or may not be given. 2 points = **Limited Indication of Achievement.** The student draws an ineffective, sloppy graph; inaccurate graph; or a direct copy of the original. Intervals are inaccurate. here is an attempt to explain. No other examples are given. 1 point = **Few Indications of Achievement.** The student draws a sloppy, ineffective, and irrelevant graph.

**PERFORMANCE TASK**

an assignment designed to show how well students have learned the content (also known as a "prompt").

**EXAMPLE: An open-ended math performance task to fulfill a standard for translating knowledge into graphs, Long Beach, California**

The owner of the Brave Bumpkin Pumpkin Company wants to sell her business and hires you to make a graph of her company's sales this year. She shows you the list of data and its graph, but she wants you to make a new graph that at first glance will make the company look more attractive to buyers. Use a ruler and carefully make your graph. Then explain what kind of graph you used; why you chose it; and how it makes the company look more attractive to buyers. Can you think of another example of a graph being used to make data look more (or less) attractive? Explain. (The information includes a graph and the volume of business by month for a year.)

**NATIONAL STANDARDS**

content and/or performance standards by grade level within a particular subject area that have been developed and endorsed by a national organization such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics or the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

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## MORE SUBSTANCE FOR THE MIDDLE GRADES

The fear that a greater emphasis on academic standards will undermine the well-known middle-school philosophy of attending to preadolescent developmental needs ignores one reality: many middle schools in urban areas are currently undermining students' chances for success because they have such low academic expectations. They find it difficult to phase out elementary-level work, and certification policies often allow teachers with elementary backgrounds to fill in anywhere in the middle grades—a situation to the liking of principals, who use such flexibility to fill gaps. However, this works against teachers' ability to develop more specific skills in their own subject area. Sixth-grade teachers who are moved from elementary to middle schools when a district needs to rearrange space can become outliers within their new schools, especially if the schools' core teaching arrangements (usually two-teacher teams for language arts and social studies or science and math) leave the sixth-grade teachers isolated from the seventh- and eighth-grade curricula.

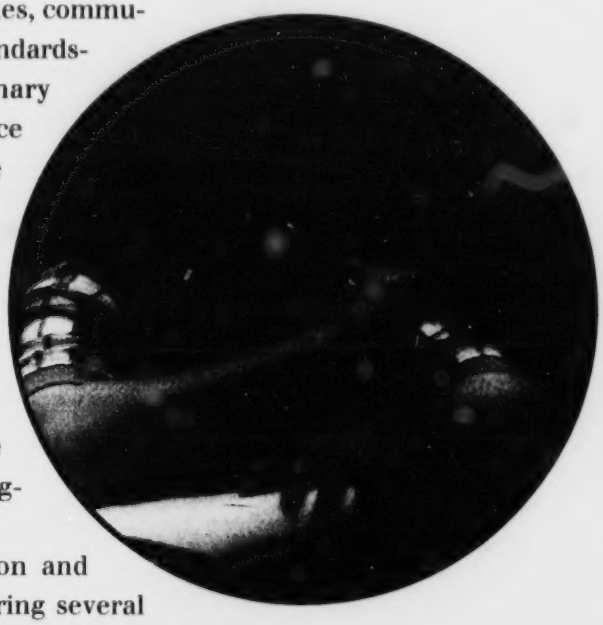
More important, emphasizing the social needs of students often leads to excuses. Teachers and principals are tempted to use students' dysfunctional lives outside of school or poverty as excuses for low performance in school—a far easier path than finding ways to reach disengaged students. With the possible exception of the richness of language used at home, the traditional explanations for the large gap between black and white test scores "do not take us very far," write researchers Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips in the September 1998 issue of *The American Prospect*. Their analysis of data minimizes the "culture of poverty," single-parent status, or genetic differences as responsible for lower test scores by blacks.

> *The purpose of a middle school is not only to address the social and emotional needs of kids. It's also to prepare them to be successful in high school. And I think, unfortunately, at least in Long Beach, we were not doing that to the extent that we should have been doing it. So, we are questioning everything we have done with middle schools.*
>
> —**Chris Dominguez**, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development, Long Beach

To develop a different framework for reform, the Clark Foundation established a common set of basic operating principles for the six districts participating in its initiative. Each agreed to:

- establish standards regarding what students should know and be able to do by the end of the eighth grade;
- define high-quality student work and how to identify and assess it; and
- communicate clearly the expectations and progress being made to students, parents, and communities.

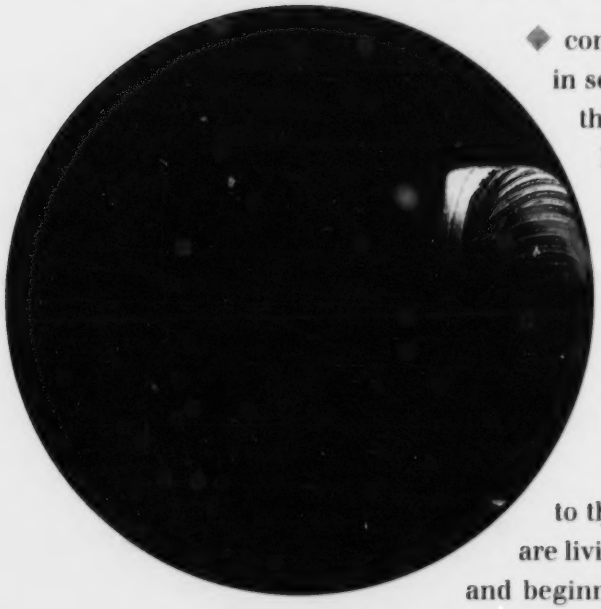
Within these simple guidelines, the six districts are pursuing standards-based reform as best suits their own needs and capacities. The Foundation endorses no single model for change. Ranging in size from about 40,000 students to more than 136,000, the districts are influenced to varying degrees by the policies of their states. Some have recently endured bitter teacher strikes, community upheavals, or changes in leadership. Yet standards-based middle-school reforms remain a primary objective in each of the districts. This persistence is best explained by the fact that the reforms are actually beginning to change practice in many classrooms. The change is not always dramatic or evenly paced. The continuum starts from a simple understanding of standards and leads to standards-based teaching and learning. There are many resting places along the way, and the districts described in this book are scattered along that trail. Yet, despite the struggles, they are still moving forward.



The basis for the following documentation and commentary was gathered over 18 months during several visits to one school in each district, a school selected for special help because of poor academic results. These "focus" schools serve as metaphors for change

efforts throughout each district. They also provide a close-up view of the true proving ground for standards-based reform: classrooms where teachers are trying to transform teaching and learning for students who need such changes the most. The book also explores a deeper understanding of the critical issue for the schools—teacher quality. The book:

- looks at standards-based reforms through the eyes of good teachers;
- draws from a survey sent to all teachers in each of the six focus schools and an analysis of that survey by Barnett Berry, associate director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future;
- is enriched by excellent qualitative evaluation conducted by Education Matters, Inc., whose investigators followed a select group of teachers in each district;
- contains data analysis conducted in several districts by the Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Educational Policy at Boston College; and
- benefits from frequent conversations with district leaders who provided a perspective that complemented what was happening in schools.



The stories recounted here ultimately belong to the students, teachers, and administrators who are living them every day. Together, they are seeking, and beginning to find, better ways to make youngsters like Charles want to come to school, do well while they're there, and look forward to a good future in the years ahead.

# STANDARDS SNAPSHOT

## Chattanooga, Tennessee

DISTRICT ENROLLMENT:
**42,773**
MIDDLE-GRADES ENROLLMENT:
**10,013**
ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF MIDDLE-SCHOOL STUDENTS:
**0.6% American Indian/Alaskan Native; 1.3% Asian/Pacific Islander; 25% Black/Not Hispanic; 0.8% Hispanic; 64.6% White/Not Hispanic; 0.9% Other**
PERCENTAGE ELIGIBLE FOR FREE/REDUCED-PRICE MEALS:
**39.53%**
NUMBER OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS:
**19; (including one K-8; two K-12; and one 5-8)**
NUMBER OF MIDDLE-GRADES TEACHERS:
**330**

IN CHATTANOOGA, CITY SCHOOLS BEGAN working on middle-school reform with a Clark Foundation grant in the 1992–93 school year. Their first steps included developing a vision, providing professional development, and creating a middle-school network that introduced teachers to new instructional strategies. An early version of standards, which seems in hindsight to have failed to stretch people's thinking far enough, was followed by a joint standards committee involving teachers and administrators from Hamilton County. As the city and county systems prepared to merge, the city's experience with middle school improvement helped shape collaborative work.

Professional development continued through summer and site-based activities, and Chattanooga's three focus middle schools received help from the central office in developing school improvement plans. Even so, the merger of the two systems slowed the pace of standards-based change and delayed the full implementation of standards until the 1999–2000 school year. The Foundation decided in 1997 to suspend further grants until the new system could devote more attention to standards-based reform.

Today, the city's middle schools stand out in the merged system and provide guidance for the whole K-12 effort at setting standards. Professional development opportunities gained through the Clark Foundation's initiative helped many teachers and principals in Chattanooga prepare to take leadership roles in standards-based reform. The work continues. A new superintendent, Jesse Register, required each school in the merged system to produce a five-year improvement plan that spells out how it will increase student achievement and parent involvement and how it will develop standards-based instruction.

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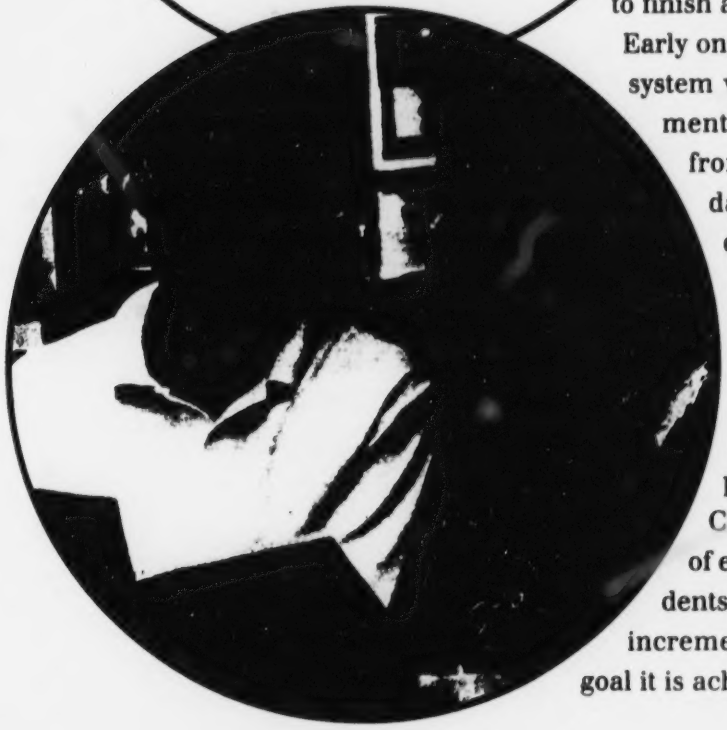
# STANDARDS SNAPSHOT

## Corpus Christi, Texas

**DISTRICT SIZE:**
**40,395 students**
**MIDDLE-SCHOOL ENROLLMENT:**
**9,194**
**ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF MIDDLE-GRADES STUDENTS:**
**69% Hispanic, 24% Anglo, 6% Black, 1% other**
**PERCENTAGE ELIGIBLE FOR FREE/REDUCED-PRICE MEALS:**
**range from 9% to 88%**
**NUMBER OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS:**
**12**
**NUMBER OF MIDDLE-GRADES TEACHERS:**
**566**



DRIVEN BY UNACCEPTABLE RESULTS on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the Corpus Christi school district began implementing standards-based reforms several years before it applied for a grant from the Clark Foundation. It developed content standards rapidly and brought the community into the process, conditioning parents and other citizens to a standards-based school system through a campaign that included everything from public forums to grocery bag slogans. A model for the expectations set is the district's determination to require all eighth graders to finish algebra I.

Early on, the district realized that the grading system would have to be brought into alignment with standards. Early resistance from teachers and parents to a standards-based report card persuaded district officials to create more opportunity for bottom-up discussion and to gradually build support for a different reporting system. New scoring criteria and progress reporting forms based on standards were in place by September 1997. Corpus Christi has explicitly adopted the goal of expecting at least 75 percent of all students to achieve the "acceptable standard incremental increase" on TAAS scores—a goal it is achieving.

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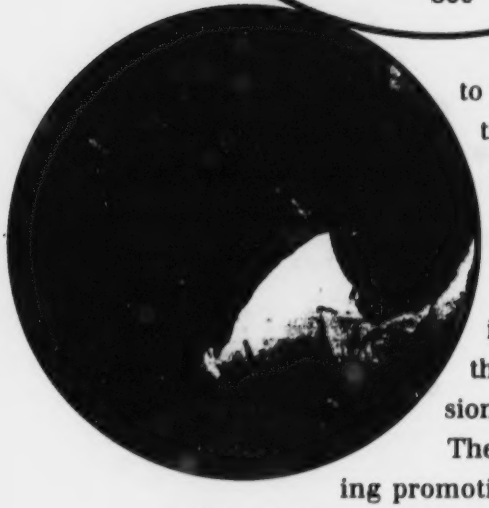
# STANDARDS SNAPSHOT

## Long Beach, California

DISTRICT ENROLLMENT:
**89,551**
MIDDLE-SCHOOL ENROLLMENT:
**19,855**
ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF MIDDLE-GRADES STUDENTS:
**30.3% limited English proficient,**
**81.5% minority overall**
PERCENTAGE ELIGIBLE FOR FREE/
REDUCED-PRICE MEALS:
**75.5%**
NUMBER OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS:
**21 (including one K-8 and one K-12)**
NUMBER OF
MIDDLE-GRADES TEACHERS:
**800**

LONG BEACH WAS ONE OF THE FIRST districts in California to develop its own academic standards for all students. The process of developing those standards was underway when the Clark Foundation made its initial grant to the district in 1992. Today, every aspect of the school system—including leadership, the content of teaching, student assessment, support for teachers, and the use of resources—is driven by a commitment to standards-based reform.

Three components of standards-based reform in Long Beach continue the momentum: investment in leadership, professional development, and assessment strategies.



The district focuses on giving opportunities for leadership to teachers and supporting those it selects for leadership positions. For example, Chris Dominguez, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instructional resources, revived the district's role in curriculum by selecting teachers to be coordinators for core academic areas. As their work began to affect classroom practice, Dominguez's role expanded to include professional development, an acknowledgment that the areas of curriculum, instructional resources, and professional development are interdependent.

The district is pursuing strong accountability measures, including promotion standards for fifth graders and a special academy for eighth graders who fail two or more subjects. Activities and plans such as this have forced teachers and administrators in the middle grades to evaluate their grading policies and support systems for low-achieving students. At the same time, the district became more aware of inequities in resources across schools, especially student access to high-quality teaching, and moved to create more equal opportunities.

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# STANDARDS SNAPSHOT

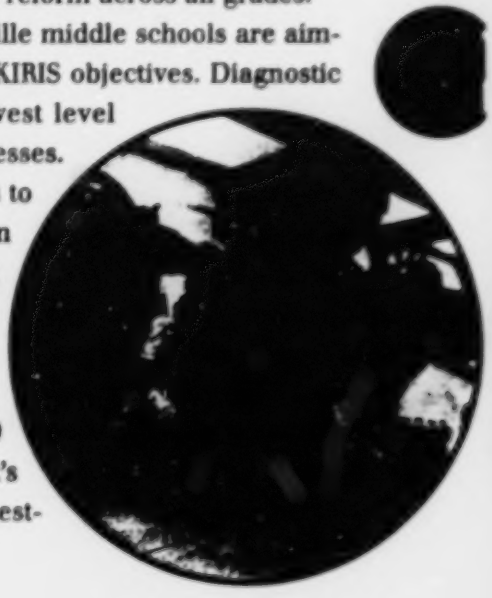
## Louisville, Kentucky

DISTRICT ENROLLMENT:
**95,584**
MIDDLE-SCHOOL ENROLLMENT:
**20,085**
ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF MIDDLE-GRADES STUDENTS:
**31.4% Black, 313 limited-English proficient**
PERCENTAGE ELIGIBLE FOR FREE/ REDUCED-PRICE MEALS:
**48.07%**
NUMBER OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS:
**25**
NUMBER OF MIDDLE-GRADES TEACHERS:
**1,077**

HAVING ACHIEVED MODEST SUCCESS DURING the first round of Clark Foundation grants, Louisville opted to continue its reforms under the new standards-based effort. The district's curriculum and assessment unit developed standards rapidly, but it became obvious that there were difficult problems to be ironed out, including pressure from the state accountability system, unfocused professional development, and an unclear vision of the connection between standards-based reforms and the Kentucky Educational Reform Act (KERA).

Everything changed in the fall of 1996 when more than half of Louisville's middle schools failed to meet achievement goals for the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS). Alarmed by the results, district officials, principals, and many teachers supported more fundamental change. A new vision for the district, drawn up by the superintendent and adopted by the school board, committed the system to standards-based reform across all grades.

According to the terms of the Foundation grant, Louisville middle schools are aiming for numerical goals that meet and exceed the former KIRIS objectives. Diagnostic tests of every student whose KIRIS scores are at the lowest level (novice) help teachers direct instruction at students' weaknesses. A number of efforts have been designed to enable teachers to use performance tasks in their classrooms and acquire an understanding of what good student work looks like. Clark Fellows, experts in core subject areas and assessment, work with teachers individually or in groups on raising the content level of their instruction, developing performance assessments and evaluating student work. In the 1998–99 school year, the work of these fellows focused on the district's poorest-performing middle schools. The district also is investing in principal leadership for standards-based reforms.



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# STANDARDS SNAPSHOT

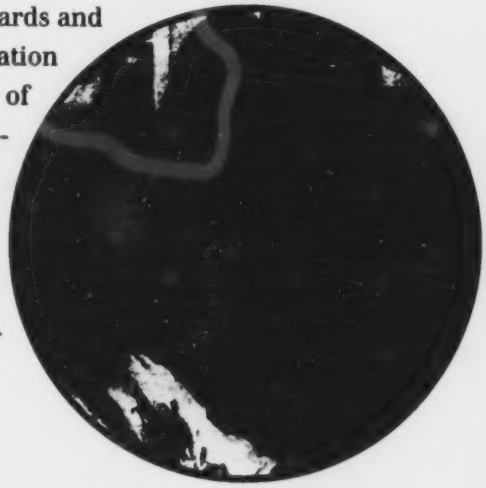
## Minneapolis, Minnesota

DISTRICT ENROLLMENT:
**49,388**
MIDDLE-SCHOOL ENROLLMENT:
**10,555**
ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF MIDDLE-GRADES STUDENTS:
**43% Black, 14% Asian, 32% White, 7% Native American**
PERCENTAGE ELIGIBLE FOR FREE/ REDUCED-PRICE MEALS:
**71%**
NUMBER OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS:
**25 (including 15 K-8)**
NUMBER OF MIDDLE-GRADES TEACHERS:
**547**

IN 1995, A REPORT BY THE MINNEAPOLIS SCHOOL system, *Eliminating the Gap*, documented the city's changing demographics and pinpointed a growing discrepancy in achievement between white students and students of color. The district set out to address the problem by adopting standards-based reform and moving rapidly to create sets of standards, disseminate them to teachers, align professional development to the new guidelines, and establish a new assessment system.

However, when the results of the state's eighth-grade graduation basic skills test showed a continuing wide disparity in achievement between minority and white children, community activists and parents demanded accountability from the district and improved scores. The district's efforts to focus on the basic skills did not show dramatic changes in the pass rate but did show gains in learning around standards. Leadership turnovers in the central office also set back standards-based reform development.

In spite of the problems, Minneapolis remains committed to standards-based reform. The standards established by the state mesh with district standards, and professional development plans for teachers include helping them use the performance package developed by the state for each of its standards and to create performance tasks. Although the Clark Foundation ended its support in Minneapolis after the first two years of funding (in the 1996–97 school year), the district's middle-school administrator continues to coordinate standards-based reform and professional development. The school board has approved a comprehensive "Middle Grades Platform" that is serving as a framework for transforming the middle grades. Multiple work groups are developing plans for the implementation of the platform.



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# STANDARDS SNAPSHOT

## San Diego, California

DISTRICT ENROLLMENT:
**136,067**
MIDDLE-SCHOOL ENROLLMENT:
**25,497**
ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF MIDDLE-GRADES STUDENTS:
**35% Hispanic; 30.6% White; 15% Black; 7.7% Filipino; 7.1% Indochinese; 2.8% Asian; 1% Pacific Islander; 0.7% Alaskan/Indian**
PERCENTAGE ELIGIBLE FOR FREE/ REDUCED-PRICE MEALS:
**57%**
NUMBER OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS:
**24**
NUMBER OF MIDDLE-GRADES TEACHERS:
**1,267**

EXPERIENCED AT LINKING REFORM EFFORTS to national initiatives, the San Diego school system began its work on standards during the first round of middle-school reform sponsored by the Clark Foundation. San Diego considers itself a standards-based district. It piloted projects in portfolio assessment and developed standards by judging the quality of student work as part of its participation in the formation of the New Standards reference exams. Last year, all third-, fourth-, and eighth-grade students submitted their literacy portfolios for central scoring. Because of their participation in the Clark initiative, middle-school principals and teachers took leadership roles in moving the entire district toward a standards-based approach.

Today, annual school action plans reflect the district's literacy standards that focus on reading. Literacy standards affect the whole curriculum. The district's accountability plan requires schools to increase achievement levels of all subgroups of students or face sanctions under the district's Program Accountability Review. The district is using portfolio assessment as a way of guaranteeing that student classwork addresses standards. Standards, rubrics, and portfolios are discussed throughout the year at staff meetings and at parent workshops. Content and performance standards have been produced for all the core subjects and are posted in classrooms as a reference for teaching. The district also is developing a standards-based report card. New district leadership has put a premium on professional development at the school-site level.

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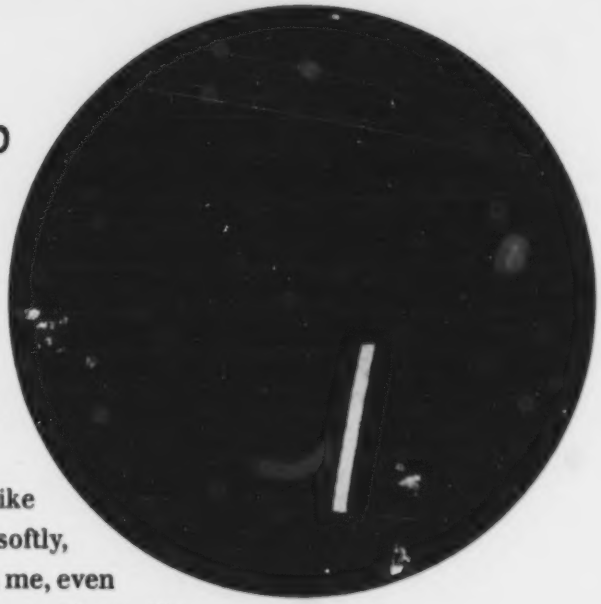
# STANDARDS CASE STUDY

## A SCIENCE TEACHER WHO REACHES EVERY STUDENT



**JANET SEIBERT**
Eighth-grade Science Teacher
and Clark "Cadre" Teacher
**NOE MIDDLE SCHOOL**
Louisville, Kentucky

Janet Seibert moves around her classroom like a perpetual motion machine. Effortlessly, softly, she is everywhere at once. "I want all eyes on me, even if you need to move your chairs," she tells her students. She covers the room, going from the overhead screen to the experiments spread out at group tables, asking questions and commenting on her students' attempts to measure the nutrients in river water or explain how simple toys show Newton's laws of motion.

Making sure all students participate in each class period, Seibert encourages them to think of creative ways to approach their experiments, such as measuring energy from different wattage light bulbs. "Put an object in a dark room and see how far each bulb illuminates it," suggests one. "Leave it on and see how long it lasts," says another. "Compare them to energy from solar cells," adds one. Every idea is discussed and added to the pool. "In science," Seibert explains, "we accept all theories."

Seibert coaches her students on scientific concepts, always devising different ways for them to learn the material. The light bulb experiment, for example, was one of many times they thought about the difference between test and control groups. Teaming up with the art teacher during a unit on the Renaissance, her students researched Leonardo da Vinci's use of cadavers. As a science project, they constructed model torsos and hearts. They set them up at a science and arts fair where they explained how the heart pumps and took people's pulse rates.

Every assignment begins with an explanation of how it addresses the curriculum, the academic expectations, and the science standards (she cites a specific national or state standard). Seibert explains to students how their work will be assessed and scored. Running across the top of her classroom walls, above the colorful science exhibits and

reports, are large-lettered reminders of the steps to follow in answering a question: demonstrate, contrast, describe, identify, define, and interpret. Students throughout the district are encouraged to follow this method for answering "open response" questions in preparing for Kentucky's statewide assessments.

Students groan at the constant open-response drills, but Seibert explains that her purpose is to get them ready for what they will find beyond school. "If you apply for a job at a company," she tells them, "you are not going to be given a multiple-choice test. They are going to ask you, 'What would you do in this situation?' But for college admission tests, you need to be able to do multiple-choice tests, so we have to get you ready for them too." She points out that their current textbook unit, water-borne microbiotic diseases (the river water experiment), is "perfect" for multiple-choice questions because it demands a knowledge of many specific facts. She tells them to study and take notes on several pages and then gives them a multiple-choice test. In the experiment phase, they record their observations, conducting the test several times for more data, and then write up the complete results.

Seibert prefers that her classes reflect a mix of the enrollment at Noe Middle School: the gifted students, those attracted to its performing arts magnet, and the one-third of students who are the "resides," the district's label for students who live in the school's attendance zone. The neighborhood students are increasingly diverse, and most come from low-income families; some live in housing projects. The school also has the largest percentage of language minority students of any middle school in the state. Seibert, who taught in parochial schools for many years, is stimulated by the greater diversity at Noe. Mixed classes are easier to teach, she believes, because she can organize groups to include some highly competent and some low-skilled students (although the students don't know her plan). "Kids helping kids to understand things allows me to reach more and them to learn more," she explains. Homogeneous grouping "narrows teaching across the board."

If Noe's scheduling creates homogeneous classes (or "segregated" ones, as she terms them), she still teaches every class the same material, giving some classes more time to finish the work. Every student does every experiment; all enter the science fair. Still, she admits that extra efforts with lower-achieving students—even incentives like pizza parties and special trips—don't always work. "They just will not show what they know," she says with some exasperation but no put-down of those lagging behind.

Stretching to meet most of her eighth graders eye-to-eye, Seibert disarms many of them with her total respect for students. If she needs to talk to a student about behavior, it is outside the classroom door. When a student playfully threatens to drink some of the polluted river water in the beaker given to his group, she keeps talking to the whole class, calmly pours out all the water except a small amount for the experiment, hands the beaker back, and never says a word to the student: no threats, no interruptions, just a masterful defusing of what could have been a showdown. Another time when she is showing a National Science Foundation video on the history of science in the 20th century, she goes to each group to quietly explain a comment in the film about blacks not being allowed to be on radio broadcasts. However, "I cut the nudes out of one film," she sighs. "I just didn't want to have to deal with that."

Seibert began to assume a leadership role soon after she arrived at Noe. The state's standards-based reforms had been ignored at her previous schools: "I was the only teacher who read the state's transformation document," she recalls, in a reference to the state standards. She has also read the national science standards developed by several groups and now plans her units around these sources. As one of two "cadre" teachers at the school selected for leadership training in standards-based reform, she has received special preparation to develop performance tasks based on standards and to help other teachers in the school do the same. "She can cruise through the classrooms and help other teachers directly because she is one of them and not an administrator," points out the instructional vice principal for the school.

Seibert became convinced early on that standards-based teaching opens up learning for students: "It helps students learn to communicate what they know. I buy into the

standards because kids are learning science in the way they should, evaluating things scientifically. They are learning to read something in a paper and say, 'That is not valid.'"

Although already an experienced and innovative teacher, Seibert has changed her instruction, too, because of the standards emphasis at Noe and in her professional development. She is doing more classroom planning than ever before. "You have to plan ahead for students who don't get the material easily," she says. Sometimes, "Mom," as her students often call her, is as direct as she can be with students who aren't trying. She stopped one youngster in the cafeteria who had not been turning in work and told him, "If I were your Mom, this is what I would say: 'You aren't doing your work, and I'm angry at you because I want you to succeed, and I love you.'" She had tried everything else she could think of, but this little speech made a difference. He started doing better.

Many students at Noe have a lot to deal with, she realizes, but she doesn't excuse them from making an effort. During classes toward the end of a quarter, she sits every student down at her computer and explains their grade to them and how they can bring it up. She gives lots of incompletes, demanding good work but also giving students time to meet the standards. Students who make an effort in her class are ready for next year's high-school science classes, she believes. The lack of language skills may prevent some from doing well on state tests—and that worries Seibert a lot—but she is sure, and most in her classes become convinced, that students of every ability can understand science concepts and learn to ask good questions about science in their lives.

# DESIGNING STANDARDS-BASED CLASSROOMS

For many teachers, shifting to standards-based teaching is a bit like learning to eat calamari. Someone else orders it off the menu, then everyone gives it a try. The adventurous eaters may relish it immediately, while others need to taste it a few more times before willingly ordering it themselves. A few never acquire the taste.

The menus for standards-based teaching in the Clark middle schools list some common ingredients. Teachers in all of the districts found standards developed by national subject-area groups to be useful. Standards from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, highly respected professional organizations, helped teachers and others develop perspectives for their own content standards, and, thus, discouraged repetition of the content from one grade to another. In history, the initial standards proposed by several groups were

pilloried by politicians, but the modified ones have influenced state and local standards because teachers found their emphasis on "big ideas," not just facts, to be logical. Geography, which had almost disappeared from the curriculum, came back through standards supported by the National Geographic Society. Geography is now taught in a fairly uniform way across the six districts. Language arts standards, however, depend to a large extent on local and state values and priorities, although all exceed traditional curriculums in their emphasis on reading and writing skills.

In all the Clark districts, a handful of teachers participated in framing the standards. Then, in most districts, drafts circulated to all teachers within a discipline for a round of feedback. The process was open, but, as is usually the case for the development of new ideas in a district, most teachers did not become heavily involved. Thus, when standards-based reforms actually shoved off, few teachers had fully thought through the impact of standards on their instruction—or on their students' learning.

To "go to scale" with standards, that is, to implement them district-wide, districts needed to entice teachers into basing their instruction on standards, not treating them as an add-on. This is like driving a taxi in New York City after learning to drive on a country road. Instead of embellishing suggested lessons from the teachers' guides to textbooks or drawing from routines established early in their careers, teachers now needed to start their instructional planning with standards. Those most adept at it set learning outcomes, develop the rubrics (how student work will be judged), and frame performance tasks and assessments related to the content. Standards-based teaching has taken hold best in places where content standards are augmented with three major types of support:

- performance standards that tell teachers and students how good is good enough when attempting to meet the content standards;
- articulate, sane assessment policies; and
- assistance for teachers in analyzing their teaching, preparing lessons and assessments, and developing on-site and local networks of expertise.

Content standards, general statements about what students should know, are often too vague to launch changes in teaching practice. Performance standards are needed to make content standards real for teachers. They define a student's level of mastery of

content standards. If content is composed of many grains of knowledge, then performance standards are the cement for that knowledge. Performance standards can be in words, such as "proficient" or "advanced" levels of mastery, as in the Kentucky model. They can be defined as numbers, as in the scale from one to five that is often used in portfolio assessments. In Corpus Christi, the performance standards are written more as common objectives. Whatever the format, performance standards tell teachers concretely what to expect of their students. Then, by discussing and comparing student work, teachers can decide together what is below average, good, or excellent. In this way, examining student work moves to the center of standards-based instruction.

The next step is for teachers to design performance assessments around standards-based lessons. This process requires that teachers (and ideally students) create rubrics (also known as scoring guides) for each level of performance. With rubrics in hand, students are able to know beforehand what is expected of them—if you want the top proficiency level, then you must do these specific things well, say the rubrics. Expectations for learning are no longer a mystery to students, teachers say. And, rubrics function as a valuable check on teachers' efforts as well.

Few urban schools have ready-made expertise within their ranks to design and carry out such standards-based teaching. Most rely on outside consultants, especially at the beginning, to provide the core training. Yet several Clark districts are explicitly building up expertise by selecting outstanding teachers to serve as resources, such as the Clark Fellows in Louisville and curriculum leaders in Long Beach. Other strategies attempt to support department chairs as leaders on standards-based teaching and principals as instructional experts.

A measure of commitment to standards-based reforms is how deeply they permeate the work of schools. Some principals in the Clark schools in Corpus Christi and San Diego, for example, tell teachers that they expect to see standards-based lessons when they conduct evaluations. In Minneapolis, teachers submit improvement plans that must relate to the standards-based plans of the school and of the district. District-wide assessment programs in San Diego and Long Beach engage teachers in scoring portfolios, guiding them to consensus about the rubrics they will use. Teacher networks in Louisville promote intensive discussion about standards pertaining to particular subject matter. Common scoring guides encourage teachers throughout the Long Beach and Corpus Christi systems to hold all students to the same standards.

Nothing describes this transformation in teaching as well as teachers' work—the

lessons and assessments they create. Understandably, most teachers struggle to make the changes. In some districts, models of performance assessments linked to specific standards are distributed to teachers to accelerate their learning process. Teachers often begin by checking their completed unit plans to see how well they cover the standards. Gradually, most teachers realize that the tried-and-true lessons they used in the past may address the standards somewhat but fall short in many ways. In other words, you can't keep adding new cuffs to a sweater that has outlived its usefulness. Teachers report that they face the distasteful task of giving up or completely revamping favorite units because they do not relate to standards. Eventually, more teachers begin their planning for units—and the whole year—with standards; they design their units based on standards rather than consigning standards to an afterthought.

## STANDARDS-BASED LESSONS IN ACTION

What does a standards-based lesson look like? Each of the following examples includes a standard, a teacher's lesson plan, student activities or work, and the teacher's reflections on the lesson. By analyzing actual student work, teachers are able to pinpoint effective and ineffective elements in the lesson and improve their own instruction.

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### EXAMPLE 1

**From the district's science standards, Louisville, Kentucky**

"Students understand scientific ways of thinking and working and use those methods to solve real-life problems."

"Students identify, analyze, and use patterns such as cycles and trends to understand past and present events and predict possible future events."

### LESSON PLAN

Janet Seibert, an eighth-grade science teacher at Louisville's Noe Middle School, addresses these standards in her unit on the physics of toys. The unit also addresses two science standards developed by the American Association for the Advancement of

Science. "The motion of an object can be described by its position, direction of motion, and speed." And, "That motion can be measured and represented on a graph." She divides the unit into three lessons:

**Lesson One**

The following concepts of physics are discussed with emphasis on the vocabulary of physics: Newton's First Law, Newton's Third Law, momentum, gravity, friction, force, centripetal, centrifugal, motion, and acceleration. The students will make a preliminary list of definitions for these vocabulary words and laws. The procedures for designing and conducting an experiment are reviewed (choosing the investigation question, independent variable, dependent variable, and control; hypothesis; procedure; materials list; conducting the experiment; keeping of records in a log; graphing the results; analyzing the results; and conclusions).

Assessment: The students will verify their vocabulary definitions when they do their own investigation and listen to other students' presentations. A vocabulary quiz will be given at the end of the unit.

**Lesson Two**

A group of toys are placed on each table, as well as the vocabulary list from the preceding day. The students play with the toys, finding ways to demonstrate the vocabulary. They are then given a "Design an Experiment" worksheet to guide them in designing an experiment to test one aspect of physics listed on the paper, using the toys at their table as materials for the experiment. They conduct the experiment, keep a log of their results, and produce a graphic representation of those results.

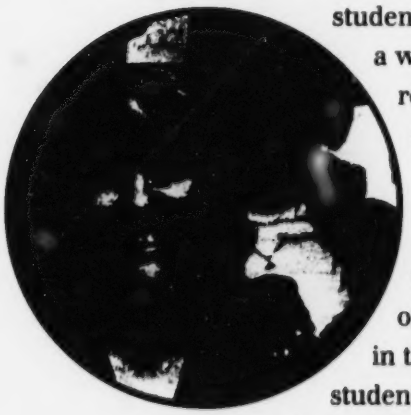
Assessment: Students will hand in their design worksheet, log, and graphic representation. A scoring guide known to students at the beginning of the unit tells what is required for level 1 to level 4.

Lesson Three

Student groups will present their experiment to the class. Each group's experimental design will be discussed by the whole class, which comments on correct design aspects and recommends how the design could be improved.

Assessment: The presentation should include all aspects of the design worksheet, a demonstration of the experiment, and an explanation of their graph. Another scoring guide tells students what they need to do for each performance level.

For the final assessment, Seibert places a basket containing a group of assorted balls at each table. She asks students to choose a question they would like to investigate—a test of material, size, density, or "bounce-ability." Selecting one of the balls, each student designs and conducts his or her own experiment using a worksheet to organize the design and a log to record results. The students type up their work in the form of a lab report that can be used as a portfolio entry.



**SEIBERT COMMENTS**

"The science standards integrate some content of what were formerly very independent fields. Certain concepts of physics, for example, are now introduced much earlier in the high-school curriculum. As eighth graders, my students need to enter high school with some familiarity of the laws of physics. This lesson does that in an engaging way, and I find that students of all skill levels are able to learn something from it. Many students who are not verbally advanced understand the laws of physics in practical ways, even though they may not know they are physics-wise. I feel that for most students of middle-school age, the first battle we have is engaging the student in learning. This lesson does that for students of all levels. It also allows all students to succeed. Once a student is interested and finds success, she or he is open to further challenges."

EXAMPLE 2

**From the district's math standards, Long Beach, California**

"Functions and Patterns—Students will recognize, describe, and generalize patterns and build mathematical models to predict the behavior of real world phenomena which exhibit the observed pattern; Numbers—Students will generate, read, and use multiple representations of the same quantity; Probability/Statistics—Students will understand how information is processed and translated into usable knowledge in order to make decisions."

Math teachers at the middle-school level are great fans of using M & M candies in their projects. Sales reports from the candy manufacturer must show a huge bulge in consumption for this pre-teen age group considering how many are engrossed in deciding on the frequency of certain colors. Pam Whisner, sixth-grade science and math teacher at Stephens Middle School in Long Beach goes beyond studying simple frequencies, using the lesson to fulfill standards on numbers, statistics, graphing, and geometry.

**LESSON PLAN**

Problem: Given 25 M & Ms, use different methods to compare the number of each color. How do your amounts compare to others in your group? Which color is the most prevalent? Least?

Materials needed: 25 M & Ms, graph paper, colored pencils, protractor, calculator, pencil, ruler, lined notebook paper, white typing paper, colored construction paper, glue stick, and compass.

Directions: Separate the M & Ms by color. Record the colors in a frequency table. Use the information in the frequency table to create a bar graph. Be sure to label the axes correctly.

Take the information in the frequency table and make a table with the following headings: Color of M & M, Fraction, Decimal, Percent, and Degrees in a Circle. Under the last column, write total. Add the numbers

in each column to find the total. Use lined paper or graph paper. Remember, the total in the fraction column should be 25/25; the decimal total is 1.00; the percent total is 100%; and the degree total is 360.

Take the compass and draw a circle on white unlined paper. Use the protractor to make a circle graph showing the colors of M & Ms you received. Color each section of the circle appropriately. Label each section in the circle to show the percent.

Organize all of your work on a large sheet of construction paper. Be sure to follow the P.S.S. method: write the problem in your words; in the strategy section, put all of your tables and graphs; explain how and why you do what you do (the explanation is as important as the work) and in the solution, answer the problem using complete sentences.

**RUBRIC:**

**6 POINTS:** All parts of the assignment have been correctly completed. The work is shown, and the explanation is thorough and complete. There are no computation or conceptual errors.

**5 POINTS:** All parts of the assignment have been correctly completed. The work is shown. There is an adequate explanation. There are no computation or conceptual errors.

**4 POINTS:** All parts of the assignment have been completed. The work is shown and an explanation has been given. There may be some computation errors but no conceptual errors.

**3 POINTS:** All parts of the assignment have been attempted. There may be an explanation. There may be computation and conceptual errors.

**2 POINTS:** Some parts of the assignment have been attempted. There may be an explanation. There may be computation and conceptual errors.

**1 POINT:** There is evidence that an attempt at the assignment was made.

The students who receive a score of 3 or less will be asked to attempt to correct their mistakes.

## WHISNER COMMENTS

"This is an assignment done as a review of content standards that have been taught throughout the year. The standard of number skills is met with the fractions, decimals, and percents. The standard on statistics is shown with the frequency table and bar graph. The standard on geometry is met with finding the degrees in each part of the circle graph. I think that the more the students integrate the standards the better they will understand them. I try not to teach in isolation and enjoy their discovery of relationships found in math.

"My students have fun while doing the project. They are always amazed at the math they know and how that knowledge can be stretched. The conclusions they are able to write always amaze me. This is not my original project, but I like to think that my version challenged my students to think beyond the norm for sixth grade. They feel proud and 'intelligent' when the project is finished.

"We have extended the activity by combining data from a group and creating a gallery of the results. The information is put on butcher paper, and a docent from each group explains the information shown. We also have combined all of the groups to make a class poster. This provides great information for comparing and ordering of decimals. It is a great way to review vocabulary."

EXAMPLE 3

**From the district's language arts standards, San Diego, California**

"The student responds to nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama using interpretive, critical and evaluative processes, including: identifies recurring themes across works; interprets the impact of authors' word choice, content, and literary elements; identifies the characteristics of literary genres; identifies the effects of point of view; analyzes the reasons for a character's actions, taking into account the situation and basic motivation of the character; makes inferences and draws conclusions about the events, characters, setting, and theme of fiction and nonfiction; identifies one-dimensional characters as opposed to fully developed characters; and identifies the effect of literary devices, such as figurative language, allusion, diction, dialogue, and description."

**LESSON PLAN**

Karen Lynn, a language arts teacher in grades seven and eight at Pershing Middle School, chose to respond to these standards by asking her students to compare a piece of literature with a presentation in another medium. Her students wrote a compare/contrast essay on the novel *Johnny Tremain*, about the Revolutionary War, and the Walt Disney movie based on the book. Her materials for students included :

- a written definition of compare and contrast;
- a format to guide the essay;
- an essay task list (read the directions, brainstorm your ideas) ; and
- rubrics for scores that ranged from level 1 to level 5.

**LYNN COMMENTS**

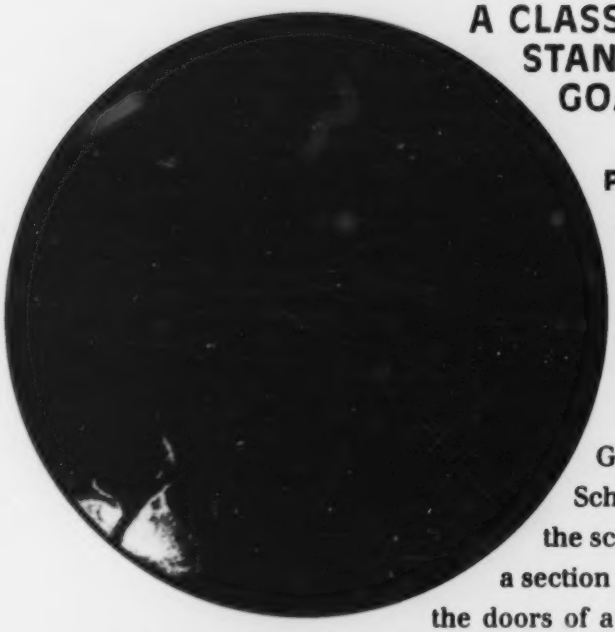
"In my classes, the percentage of below-grade-level readers is close to eighty percent. I intended this writing assignment to be a reading accomplishment entry for their portfolio. Upon reflection,

after reading the results of the students' work, I realized that I did not fashion the assignment or prepare my students enough to really have the opportunity to meet the standard completely. I decided to go ahead and grade the essays within the parameters I gave and not include it in their portfolios. It caused me to realize more and more how important it is to create the rubric first and then create the assignment requirements so that both are in sync.

"My mistake was in focusing only on the character and plot differences between the book and the film without also discussing theme, ideas, and points of view. In fairness to myself, even the limited focus we did use was very difficult for many of my students, most of whom still struggle with the idea of a five-paragraph essay of any kind. Of those who submitted a final draft of the essay, most were able to compare and contrast at least three to five different points. I plan to rework the assignment to include more guidance on the body paragraphs (and more preliminary discussion and note-taking on theme, ideas, etc.). I also will rework the grading rubric to a more specific inclusion of only those bullets addressed by the assignment, including a check-off list of points to be addressed in the essay."

# STANDARDS CASE STUDY

## A CLASSROOM WHERE STANDARDS DEFINE CLEAR GOALS FOR LEARNING

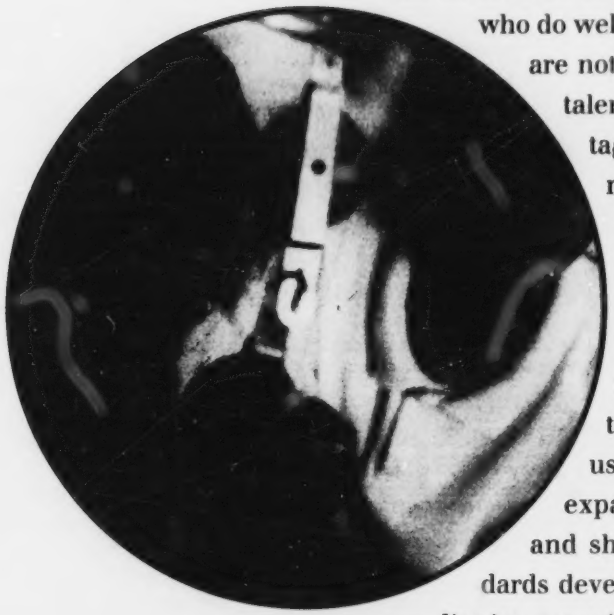


**PAM WHISNER**
Sixth-grade Math/Science Teacher
and Standards Development
Teacher Leader
**STEPHENS MIDDLE SCHOOL**
Long Beach, California

Go out the back door of Stephens Middle School, past the portable classroom where the school's steel band is practicing and across a section of the black-topped playground, through the doors of a regulation-beige, portable duplex, and you find yourself in a classroom steeped in standards-based teaching and learning. This is where Pam Whisner, sixth-grade math and science teacher, makes standards visible everywhere to her students and evident in everything they learn.

In most classrooms in the Clark network, posters of the district's standards or hand-written ones made by teachers are pinned to the walls. But Whisner's walls are different. They are covered with student work, and for each assignment graph, map, chart, or group research project a standard is written in bold print beside the student products. Below individual student drawings of snowmen and children on graph paper, for example, is a reminder: "Standard 1. Student will graph ordered pairs on the coordinate plane."

Whisner is a traditional teacher who fuses standards with what she has learned during more than 25 years in the classroom. Unlike some experienced teachers who don't intend to change what they believe works for them, this teacher is open to making her instruction fit better with the standards reforms in Long Beach. After teaching in the parochial system for 20 years, she switched to the public schools and a different challenge. "It took me a few weeks to realize how little English some of my students knew," she says. At Stephens, Whisner teaches three math/science block classes for the Learning



and Excellence Academy Plan (LEAP), which enrolls students who do well in classes and have good English skills but are not advanced enough to qualify for gifted and talented classes. She admits she has the advantage of having more motivated students than many of her colleagues.

Over the years, Whisner has learned that covering all the content in a textbook shortchanged her students. She began to develop more hands-on projects grounded in conceptual learning (during many visits to her classroom, textbooks were never used). The standards adopted in Long Beach expanded her ideas about teaching concepts, and she has become a teacher-leader on standards development, serving as department chair and on district committees that are writing performance assessments. Always looking for professional support, she participated in a two-year National Science Foundation program on teaching math, attends workshops, and searches for professional reading. She presents at workshops, too, and spent a summer aligning her instruction to standards, adding examples of performance standards. She shares her plans with other math teachers at the school, showing them how a whole year's work could become standards-based. She keeps track of the standards she has covered on a computer, developing performance assessments for every sub-set of standards.

Grouped at tables so they can easily work together, her students use tiles, geometry boards, and other hands-on tools known as manipulatives. When creating geometric patterns, however, they often cut the shapes out of paper. "Some students learn better that way," she explains. When teaching a concept, the calculators are put away, "but we use them when learning the 'why' of problems," she says. "Teachers need to realize that higher order thinking skills are as important as basic facts, and calculators can help with that." Her students do an open-ended "math problem of the week" that requires extensive writing. Her directions make them think beyond the mechanics: "State the problem in your own words; write it clearly; tell how you solved it; show your work; use

diagrams, tables, and graphs; answer the problem in a sentence; tell what you think of the problem—is it too hard, too easy, about right?"

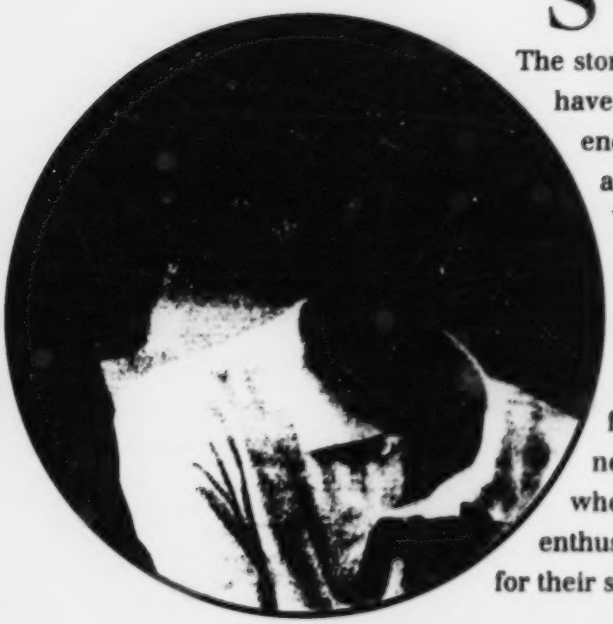
In department meetings, Whisner helps her colleagues understand that one lesson can cover several standards, "that they don't have to get hung up on one area and drill it to death." She tries to convince them to leave behind what she considers elementary-level subjects, such as whole numbers, "but some teachers are adamant about teaching the basics."

Her students get the same message. "Mark off zeros instead of adding columns," she tells them. "Adding columns of zeros is elementary stuff." She explains the standards addressed by each lesson, reminding students that they are expected to show performance on each standard before moving on to seventh grade. She shows them shortcuts: "Build a rectangle around a polygon, then subtract the areas, which are triangles, to get the surface area of the polygon." She uses her training on multiple intelligences, or the individual learning strengths of students, to give students lots of ways to learn and show what they have learned. Soft music plays in the background while students do warm-up problems from an overhead. Sometimes she ends the class session by reading fiction that relates to science or math.

What distinguishes learning in Whisner's bungalow room from many traditional classes is that students find math both accessible and fun. To develop a frequency table, students choose a favorite item—ice cream, colors, movies, sports—and move around the room in a frenzy to ask 20 classmates for their opinions. She encourages students to use a variety of ways to present science projects for a "brief" unit on the solar system. She suggests: a talk show, a roulette game, or a quiz. Learning that most of her students had already studied the planets, she asked them to conduct research that stretched them beyond what they already knew. Confessing that this was one of her least-liked units when she was in school, she tells them, "I need you to teach me. You may think teachers know it all, but we are not specialists in everything. Find something I might not know."

Whisner is confident that her instruction is much more focused than it was before she adopted the district's standards as its base. And her students, she says, are much more aware that they have certain material and skills to master, "that school is not just random learning."

# WHAT DIFFERENCE DO STANDARDS MAKE FOR STUDENTS?



The stories of standards-based reforms in the six districts have plots, characters, tensions, sub-dramas, and no endings. Each district frames its efforts differently, and no two have had the same mixture of results. Yet the potential to improve teaching and learning is evident. Together, the districts are beginning to show that standards-based reform in urban middle grades can accomplish a great deal.

The place where standards must make a difference is student learning. The students who most need different instruction and learning are those who come into the middle grades least able and enthused about learning more. Standards can be a hook for their success.

## STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING

There is nothing as obsolete as the usual district curriculum guides. Not compelling enough to encourage teachers to make significant changes in the way they teach, the books and binders usually sit untouched on teachers' classroom shelves. Yet before the standards movement came along, these guides were among the few unifying resources available to teachers, other than the all-pervasive textbooks and standardized tests.

With so little to tie instruction together, students' experiences in school have often been disconnected and repetitive, dependent each year on the expectations of individual teachers and the content with which those teachers are most comfortable. In science, for

example, a middle-school student might spend long weeks in each grade studying the solar system, making planetary models over and over again. Or, "if the study of ants is a teacher's favorite unit, then the ants go with the teacher no matter what the grade assignment," notes Dean Gilbert, former science curriculum leader for Long Beach, where curriculum experts in core subject areas coordinate reform efforts across the district. The standards movement replaces this haphazard system, offering not only a sequential curriculum but also content that committees of teachers and others have studied, compared to recommended standards, and adapted for their students. The results are uneven among the districts but certainly more rigorous than what existed before.

But beyond saving students from endless repetition and giving them more challenging work to do, what is standards-based teaching doing for them?

## STANDARDS MAKE READING A SCHOOLWIDE PRIORITY

In every district, the infusion of greater rigor and the adoption of textbooks aligned with standards have forced teachers and administrators to act on the lack of reading skills among low-performing middle-grades students. It no longer is acceptable to complain about the poor skills of students entering the middle grades or to dump them into remedial classes and forget about them. In some low-performing schools, the problem is enormous. One Louisville middle school gave a reading test in the fall of 1997 to its 300 entering sixth graders, only to discover that fewer than 15 of them were able to read at the fifth-grade level. Although this is a worst-case example, every urban school district struggles with poor readers and writers.

Traditionally, subject-area teachers in the middle grades disdained any role for themselves as teachers of reading or writing, other than in language arts or as specialists. Now, accountability measures and a commitment to enabling all students within a school to reach standards have made students' competence in reading and writing a school-wide responsibility.

Some schools, like Washington Middle School in Long Beach, take a cornucopia approach. After scoring lower in reading than any other middle school in the district, its on-site council and principal aggressively set to work on improving student reading. "We felt if they couldn't read, they couldn't meet any standards," says Principal Sue Barker. The fact that 70 percent of the students at Washington are language minority was not an excuse for the teachers. To help every student achieve a level four in

reading and math (the district's definition of proficiency), some teachers work with small groups of students who need direct instruction in phonics or other important skills. Students whose reading scores rank them in the bottom 20 percent of all students are placed in reading classes of no more than 12 students, and eighth graders who are failing receive daily one-on-one tutoring. Teachers have been trained in reciprocal teaching, a method for improving students' comprehension skills, and discuss the results of weekly writing exercises in department meetings.

Gradually, the school is moving its students toward meeting the district's standards. Over a three-year period, reading scores improved in all three grades, and the percentage of students in the lowest quartile in reading decreased. The most recent assessments of language-minority students show continuing improvement of their reading skills.

Many low-performing schools in the six districts rely on a computerized reading program, the Accelerated Reader developed by Learning Information Systems of Madison, Wisconsin. Books are color-coded according to reading difficulty, and students take computerized tests after finishing a book. Teachers can quickly see how well students are doing through computer printouts of student scores. Because students pace themselves, teachers believe the Accelerated Reader gives students a measure of control over their learning and engages them in a way that regular assignments often fail to do. The program figures prominently in Judy Lyons's class in East Lake Middle School, for example, but she sometimes regrets that the practice reading takes time away from discussing literature. The questions tend to be factual and to minimize open-ended responses. One district decided against adopting Accelerated Reader because of this. Its literacy coordinator believes that part of building literacy skills is the opportunity for students to discuss what they have read with classmates. Still, the program gives students lots of practice and puts structure around silent reading.

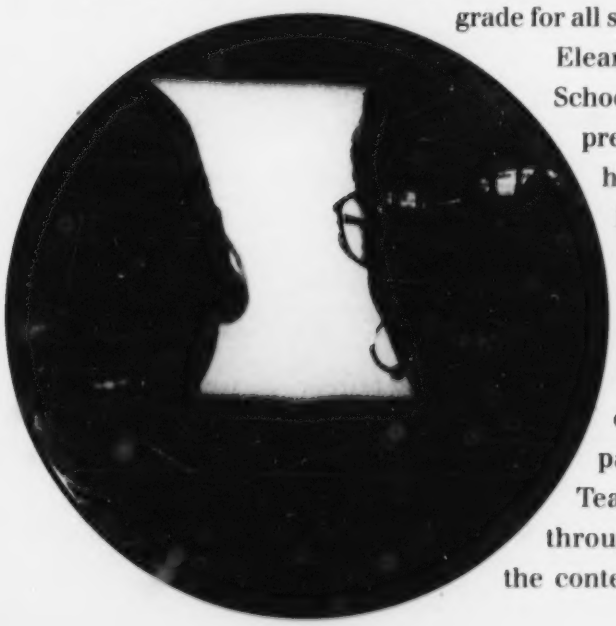
Borrowing their principal's living room, teachers at Pershing Middle School in San Diego met in small groups to establish standards for literacy portfolios, a requirement for eighth graders that became part of the district-wide assessment system in 1998. The portfolios contain selections made by students and teachers that reflect the progress and the level of learning of the student. Pershing piloted the portfolios in the 1997–98 school year. Because the portfolios include student work from all subject areas, "they create a climate for literacy across the school," says Karen Lynn, who chairs the English department. In science, students contribute an informational piece to their portfolio; for history, they

analyze a public document; and for English, they write a response to literature.

San Diego is also working on the problem of reading skills through an Australian import, First Steps, which has been implemented in every middle school. This diagnostic program tells where each child or class stands on reading skills and explains strategies to use at different levels, from early readers through six levels of competence. The program also helps teachers tell if progress is being made. "This is particularly useful for middle school teachers," says Cat Xander, former coordinator of the Clark project in San Diego, "because they don't have a clue about what to do for kids who can't read."

San Diego will need these strategies and more to achieve the goals it has set for itself. An illustration of the district's high expectations is the reading standard that calls for each student to read at least 25 books or book equivalents each year, with at least four of them focused on one issue or subject, by a single writer, or in one genre.

In Minneapolis, community protests at school board meetings and other venues were directed at the low reading and math scores of minority students on a state competency test. The strong public criticism helped persuade the district to set closer timetables for improvement, especially for the lowest performing students. For the middle grades, this has meant additional reading instruction for below-average students; Saturday, after-school, and summer school programs in reading; and a mandatory reading class in ninth grade for all students who fail the state's eighth-grade test.



Eleanor Coleman, principal of Franklin Middle School in Minneapolis until the spring of 1998, predicted the reading crisis and its effect on her students, predominantly minority and low-income, when she arrived at the school three years ago. Drawing on her background as a reading specialist, she quickly organized professional development around reading strategies across the curriculum. Teams of Franklin teachers participate in training for the Strategic Teaching and Reading Project, a model used throughout the district to improve reading in the content areas. Teachers learn to help students

connect text information to prior knowledge and develop their own strategies for reading. Coleman also encouraged teachers to link their individual professional development plans to the school's improvement plan, which emphasizes reading and math. Franklin teachers used to assume their students read at grade level, Coleman says, but after delving into the research and learning specific strategies, "they now determine what their students can do and are committed to building from that."

All these efforts reflect a much more sophisticated understanding of the literacy skills of middle-grades students—and consequently of their ability to meet standards—than the practice that existed before the introduction of standards-based reform. Recent research on problem readers reveals that students who leave third grade with poor reading skills can "catch up" only if they receive heroic, research-based, intensive interventions in the later grades. For these students, the typical short dose of silent reading every day probably only reinforces bad habits and attitudes. While setting aside a time for everyone in a school to read is admirable, it also can be used as catch-up time for teachers and goof-off time for students.

Many middle-school teachers realize that poor readers usually know much more than they are able to express in writing or to comprehend from text. They can learn at higher levels if their teachers draw upon strategies that will give them opportunities to do so.

## STANDARDS RAISE THE LEVEL AND SCOPE OF MATH INSTRUCTION

Standards-based school reforms challenge the myth that middle-grades students cannot handle abstract knowledge, such as algebra. The six Clark districts, following the lead of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards, shatter this bias by introducing more conceptual and problem-solving math at earlier grades than did the traditional curriculum they were using. According to the results of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the traditional eighth-grade curriculum in the United States is similar to the seventh-grade curriculum in the 40-plus other countries participating in TIMSS, and it is extremely repetitive. "A mile wide and an inch deep," commented the American researchers who conducted the comparative study.

A pre-algebra class at Franklin Middle School illustrated some of the problems TIMSS found with math instruction. During several visits to the same class, the work

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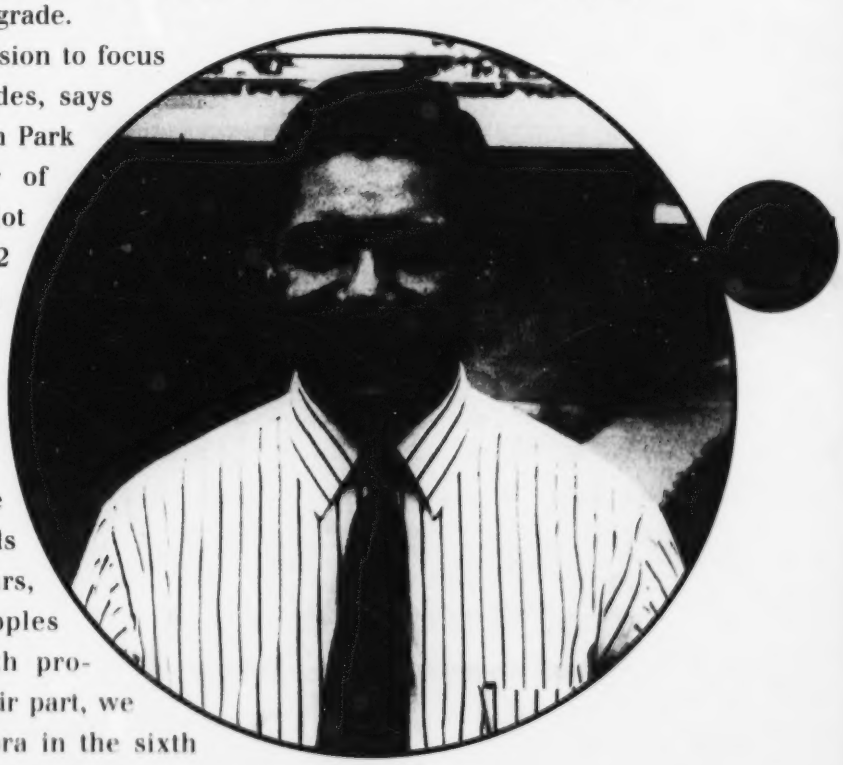
was always the same: an endless number of similar, simple algebra problems on the overhead, which students calculated one by one. There were no class discussions of concepts or "spiraling" of knowledge into more and more sophisticated ideas and problem-solving, even though the teacher had taken advanced math in college. Merely offering algebra to seventh graders, frequently done as a way to fulfill the demand for higher standards, misreads what standards-based teaching is all about.

In Corpus Christi, however, algebra became a lever for improving math instruction across the board. Its "Algebra for All" began as a pilot project and now influences the math curriculum across the district. Originally, the goal for students was to complete algebra by the end of the eighth grade. Some students now finish in seventh grade and then have a year of geometry before high school.

Rather than teach formulas from a text, Lucio Calzada, a major architect of the plan, designed algebra instruction to go from the concrete to the abstract. Students use manipulatives, real-life examples, and group problem-solving to begin tackling algebra or algebra prep in the sixth grade.



The data speak for the decision to focus on algebra in the middle grades, says Calzada, now principal of South Park Middle School. After a year of Algebra for All at the first pilot school, Grant Middle School, 72 percent of the students who had taken the full course passed the state's first-year algebra test; by 1996, the figure had increased to 91 percent. Now at four schools and scheduled to be phased in at all middle schools in the district over several years, Algebra for All created ripples throughout the district's math program. "If everyone is doing their part, we will have kids ready for algebra in the sixth

grade," says Diamentina Hinojosa, seventh-grade math teacher at South Park. She credits the district's standards with prioritizing her instruction, organizing it so that she finishes the regular curriculum by early spring and can spend the rest of the year introducing her students to algebra.

Some of Hinojosa's students begin the year not knowing simple multiplication, but she starts them out with "tactile" demonstrations of a math concept: "They must have the picture in their mind first," she says and uses such examples as comparative shopping. She and the students then work with manipulatives together, followed by paper-and-pencil practice, with students working on problems collaboratively. If students still have trouble learning a concept, she goes back to manipulatives and does individual tutoring at a table in her classroom. "Many teachers expect kids to see something once and know it, but that's very wrong," she says. Some students with special needs in her classes have jumped from being in the bottom one-third on test scores to being in the top 10 percent. In the late spring of 1998, she estimated that only three of her 90 students were failing, and she believed they would be able to pass by the end of the school year.

Corpus Christi eighth graders continue to do better on the math portion of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), improving their passing rate from 69 percent in 1997 to 82 percent in 1998—fairly close to the district goal of 90 percent by the year 2001. Calzada, however, is interested in more than the TAAS scores. In his opinion, a focus on TAAS actually lowers expectations in math because it is geared to eighth-grade arithmetic levels. "We need to go beyond TAAS, and that means we need to focus on performance standards."

## STANDARDS LINK ACTIVITIES THAT COUNT WITH CONTENT

Hands-on, experiential learning for middle-grades students is considered appropriate for their quicksilver moods and need to think concretely. However, these methods often are overused and/or irrelevant. Students enjoy being offered an array of activities, unaware that those tasks may help them only marginally in getting the most out of the curriculum. Activities may be fun, but they do not always add much to what students know. One Louisville middle school, for example, made elaborate plans for students to create garden plots in the school's courtyard. It would be fun and a visible product. But eventually the teachers decided the plan would not really address many standards and

would require a great deal of time. Teachers who embrace standards-based reform frequently admit that standards force them to analyze all their units and activities and discard those—including activities that have been their favorites for years—that do not contribute to meeting standards.

Ann Robertson, a former history teacher at Hill Middle School in Long Beach, spent long mornings in her empty classroom during the summer of 1996, going over all her units to see how well they supported the district's standards. An experienced teacher and now a standards coach for other teachers, she acknowledges "I had never done a check on myself" or set priorities. In Louisville, as teachers become more comfortable with developing their own performance tasks, students still get to do activities, but always with a specific purpose linked to standards and often as part of the culminating assessment for a unit. In some classrooms, students participate in developing the rubrics for an assignment and planning the standards-based activities related to it.

## STANDARDS ADVANCE STUDENTS' RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING

Mandatory summer school—traditionally the ultimate scourge of students' vacation plans—is viewed differently in several districts. Corpus Christi began considering a standards-based summer school as an extension of the school year in 1996 to fulfill a state policy. Students attend only those classes that cover standards they did not pass in the regular school year. Once they meet the standards, they can exit summer school. "That's so cool!" exclaimed an excited eighth grader from Martin Middle School who went home after attaining the standards he needed. In 1997, 655 students who faced retention because they had not met certain performance standards completed the work in summer school and were promoted.

In San Diego, summer school students also "catch up" through instruction that centers on the district's performance standards rather than drills of content covered during the regular school year. For the 1998 summer school, students fulfilled both the language arts standards on informational reading and the history standards on using original documents by comparing American society to another civilization. Eighth graders studied the Constitution and how it affects their daily life. For science, students conducted a forensic chemistry assignment that incorporated several standards.

*When I first heard about standards, I thought, "Here comes something new that will just mean a lot of extra work." But I am going into more depth on subjects because of standards—it's no longer two days on the sun and then move on. I stay with a subject to be sure all kids get it. Low-performing kids are coming in for help because they now have time to learn. They are writing more, and their work is more complex because of the greater depth. We still have discipline problems, but the kids aren't succeeding at tune-out behavior because they realize the performance standards are not going away.*

— **Holly Eaton**, science teacher,
Pershing Middle School, San Diego

A serendipitous outcome for students in many of the districts is their willingness to take charge of their learning. In Corpus Christi, for example, teachers have not changed as much as students' attitudes. Ask any classroom of students if they know what standards are, and all hands go up. Sixth graders know that because of standards they all undertook rigorous research papers, "step-by-step," as one young girl explained. Their faces beam when they tell about the process and the final products. Progress charts on standards are posted on most classroom bulletin boards. Students learn about the standards for each subject at the beginning of the school year—and remember them. Mapauna Jones, writing an assignment on the blackboard for her sixth-grade language arts students at South Park Middle School, muses, "I must check which standard that addresses." Immediately a student pipes up, "It's number nine, Mrs. Jones."

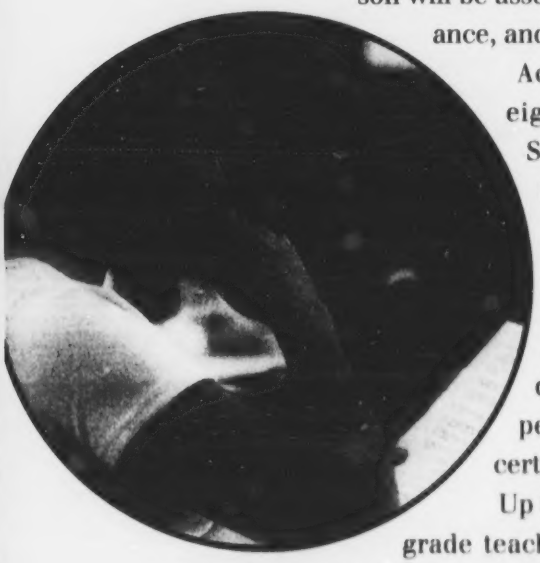
Science coach Denise Finley, one of Louisville's content resource teachers known as Clark Fellows, taught groups of students to develop and score open-response questions, one of the tools used to encourage writing and critical thinking skills among students in preparation for the state assessment, KIRIS. They learned the terminology—standards, rubrics, scoring—and shared their training with peers and parents. "You can really turn kids on with this stuff," Finley says. "They like taking ownership."

*This year... my kids are assessing one another, and they're being honest in assessing themselves. So, some of their portfolios will have a lot of pieces of work with two assessments. Mine and theirs... either a self-assessment or a peer assessment. Then I will compare and contrast... By participating in discussions with others who are assessing the same piece, they're working through the listening and speaking skills and discussing content standards.*

—**English teacher**, Stanford Middle School, Long Beach

(Quoted in an August 1997 report by Education Matters, Inc.)

In districts that have made performance standards explicit to students, there is little guesswork to learning. In Louisville, for example, Janet Seibert's students know at the beginning of an assignment what its purpose is, what standards it addresses, how each lesson will be assessed, what they will need to do for a culminating performance, and the scoring guide for the presentation they will make.



Across the country in San Diego, Carleen Hemric, an eighth-grade language arts teacher at Pershing Middle School, explains why it is important to bring students into the process of setting and demonstrating standards. She admits she had trouble developing the rubrics for lessons in her language arts classes, but after doing that for a unit, she can articulate what she expects from students clearly. She now gives kids their final exam on the first day of a unit. As Hemric points out, when kids understand performance rubrics (what is expected of them to reach certain levels), then "nothing is a secret to them anymore."

Up the coast at Long Beach, Cubberly Middle School seventh-grade teachers Lorrie LaCroix and Karen Maine ask for feedback from their students about rubrics. As reported in *Changing Schools in Long Beach*, a Clark Foundation-funded community newspaper about middle-grades reform, students said the rubrics helped them understand what was expected of them. One remarked that "you can go back and make your work better if you haven't completely followed the rubric. It lets you know exactly what you need to do to get an A."

# STANDARDS CASE STUDY

## A NEW PRINCIPAL WHO WINS SUPPORT WITH SENSITIVITY AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS

**MARY JO ASBURY**
Principal
**PERSHING MIDDLE SCHOOL**
San Diego, California

When a school is as out of sorts as Pershing Middle School was in 1995, a district usually sends in a trouble-shooting principal with no loyalties to be concerned about, a clean-slate person. As Pershing's vice principal for the previous three years, Mary Jo Asbury had lived through the reorganization from a junior high school to a middle school and the previous principal's attempts to remove teachers he thought were underperforming. Eighteen teachers filed grievances, winning back their seniority in the building. The reconfiguration plan accounted for some of the teacher shifts and anger, but Asbury had always favored the plan. Then she was named principal.

In an interview only a few months after she took the job, Asbury exuded tension, like a tightrope walker with a long balance bar. Forty percent of her staff was new, as were two-thirds of the students. Holdover teachers and neighborhood families, highly satisfied with a school that sits far up in the hills above San Diego and away from inner-city problems, looked on the change to a middle-school organization doubtfully. Asbury actually had to attend to the concerns of three parent constituencies: Jewish parents, who live near the school; conservative Christian parents, also residing nearby; and Hispanic parents, whose children ride buses to the school from the barrios downtown.

Asbury became principal as the district moved toward uniform standards and accountability measures that hold schools responsible for the success of all students. She realized that, faced with lower scores than would be expected of a school in an affluent area, families and teachers would be tempted to blame "those kids from

downtown." She needed to create loyalty among families and teachers and support for standards-based reforms.

Two years later, Asbury smiles a lot more often. "My first goal was to establish a positive climate because there was so much anger," she says. "If there is no trust, I can stand on my head and still nothing will happen." She now believes that a majority of the staff now see her as fair and willing to listen. Despite some shaky times, she also believes that she has established rapport with the community.

At the same time, Asbury brought herself and her teachers into the standards reform stream. Without personal experience in the core middle-school content areas (she taught business skills), she is an avid reader and researcher on school reform. She attended professional development sessions with her teachers on performance standards and turned over her living room to small groups of teachers who worked on curriculum alignment, performance assessment, and the annual action plan for the school. Such planning infused standards into teachers' thinking. Asbury pushed for time to be set aside at every department meeting to discuss standards-based lessons. Asbury also builds teachers' standards work into their evaluations. The Stull Process, California's legislated teacher evaluation, calls for four classroom evaluations and follow-up discussions in the year a teacher is reviewed. Asbury requires the lessons she observes to be standards-based.

Much of the professional development Asbury receives comes through the cluster organization in San Diego, intended to create collaborative work on curriculum, transitions, standards, and accountability among elementary and middle schools that feed into each high school. Principals in each cluster and middle-school principals across the

district meet regularly. "Discussing teaching and learning issues with colleagues is important to me," she says. "If you have no time for those conversations and reflections, then something important is missing." Charles Palmer, a retired middle-school principal, also serves as a mentor for Asbury and several other middle-school principals.

Sensitive to personal factors that influence how well a group works together (the death of a teacher, for example, or the complacency of teachers near retirement), Asbury balances nurturing with modeling, mentoring, and monitoring her teachers. In order to motivate them, you have to understand them, she believes. On the other hand, she says, the principal is ultimately the person who must hold teachers accountable for teaching to standards. She cares deeply about the students who don't perform well. Remembering what it was like to be a child in a very large, troubled family, she relates to their struggle to find themselves. They lose purpose and diligence easily, she knows.

Asbury is sure that setting goals students can understand and finding ways to help them meet the goals make the effort at standards-based reform worth it. "It means that teachers must reteach the content when students don't get it, but in order to get teachers to buy into that idea it is critical for principals to buy in, too."

# WHAT DIFFERENCES DO STANDARDS MEAN FOR TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS?

From one end of the country to another, middle-school teachers have customarily "done their own thing," running their classrooms according to habits built by their own preparation, their early experiences as teachers, and, often, a history of isolation. Shifted into middle schools from elementary or high schools, moved from one grade or subject to another depending on what the schedule dictates, they have found it difficult to build "content-specific pedagogy" for their teaching; that is, the skills and knowledge particular to the subjects they teach. Add to this a tendency within districts to offer mediocre professional development while imposing an endless array of faddish programs on schools and teachers, and it is no wonder that moving to standards-based teaching and learning is so hard.

During the early stages of standards-based reform, much of the work concerns changes in the curriculum, arranging what will be taught into a coherent sequence or aligning it to state standards and assessments. But that is only the first step. A Louisville school administrator, interviewed by Education Matters for the qualitative evaluation of the Clark initiative, explained how standards-based reform goes far beyond mere curriculum alignment:

> *If I'm following the traditional guide and Student A doesn't get earth science, well, it's really kind of too bad because I covered earth science and she should have gotten it. If I'm looking at a*

*standard for scientific inquiry and what I expect kids to come away with after they've studied science, then my teaching is different and I don't leave Student A behind. It's not satisfactory that Student A didn't get it even though I covered it. There is no such thing as "covering it." That kind of shift in conceptions of teaching is a major shift, and it has the power to change teaching as few reforms do.*

Although experience has shown that standards-based reform creates new opportunities for professional growth, fear and uncertainty among teachers present major hurdles in every district. Adding to these barriers in some districts are rigid union contracts that dictate the use of teacher time. At the outset of the current Clark initiative, interviews with teacher leaders and principals revealed some common concerns about the prevailing environment for improving teachers' skills, knowledge, and beliefs. A survey of teachers in each focus school (see pages 94–109) conducted later confirmed the tenacity of these concerns:

- "Many of our colleagues lack the content knowledge they need to teach to higher standards."
- "Our professional development has not been focused on bringing all students' achievement up to higher standards."
- "We don't have the time to do this."
- "Some of us are never going to change."

Yet, in spite of these understandable misgivings, instruction is beginning to change in most middle schools in the districts.

## STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS CAN FOSTER COLLABORATION AMONG EDUCATORS

A few years ago the notion that teachers could sit down together, look at students' work, and talk about how to make it better would have been rare if not impossible. They were too accustomed to working in isolation. Collaboration with colleagues had never been a priority. In many middle schools in the Clark-supported districts, however, this is how teachers are creating standards-based classrooms.

*The question we need to ask is: If it is not related to standards, then why are we teaching it?*

—**Mary Jo Asbury**, Principal, Pershing Middle School, San Diego

California's school evaluation initiative, Program Quality Review, conditioned the teachers at Pershing Middle School in San Diego to collect student work and document student progress during the 1996–97 school year. The following year, teachers collected five samples of student work and shared them at department meetings. At the last staff development day, they used rubrics decided upon by the staff ahead of time to score the student work, practicing the scoring as a group at first and then grading the student work in pairs. "This gave everyone an opportunity to judge student work based on a rubric," says Mary Jo Asbury, principal at Pershing. Building the kind of necessary trust to judge the student work of another teacher takes time, and Asbury's approach is to get to that point one step at a time. "How you frame questions to clarify an understanding of a teacher's assignment and the student work is critical," she says. "We have to realize that at this point, we are all learning."

With 150 students or more each day, teachers get caught up in "covering" the content "and lose sight of what they really want students to learn," Asbury points out. Those who believe they have been teaching to high standards all along are sometimes surprised when they take time to analyze their students' work on the basis of standards and rubrics. "You realize that half the class may have bombed, and sitting down to figure out why and then redoing the lesson is time-consuming. But standards-based teaching means you have to re-teach something when kids don't get it," she says.

At Pershing, the next step was to follow department-level discussions of student work with professional development to help teachers design lessons and rubrics based on standards. Summer and school-year professional development has allowed the entire staff to learn how to score school-wide performance assessments (the district's work with New Standards, a research-based assessment system from the Learning and Research Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh, offered teachers opportunities to learn how to develop rubrics and score portfolios). Summer workshops on writing standards-based lessons "totally changed" teaching for Karen Lynn, English department chair at Pershing. Before her training, she used only grades, not rubrics, for assessment. Although she admits to "still stumbling along on creating rubrics," she is focusing on making sure her students know what the standards are. Department meetings show an

evolution of understanding at Pershing, according to Lynn. The school staff, for example, assessed students' literacy portfolios that had already been scored at the district level, but the scoring sheets had been removed. "Our teachers remarked that they couldn't score many of the portfolios because the work didn't address standards," says Lynn. They discovered, she says, that teachers had not linked the assignments to standards. It is not the level of student work the process reveals that is so helpful, she adds, but the insights teachers get about their own standards and assessment practices. It is also "a way of getting teachers who are not up to par to see what they ought to be doing."

What does this process of collaborative evaluation of "teachers' work" look like? The fall 1997 issue of *Changing Schools in Long Beach* "eavesdropped" on a conversation among social studies teachers at Hoover Middle School. The teachers had applied for and received a California Demonstration Grant several years earlier that enabled them to purchase primary source material and resources for their own professional development, including a "coach" from a local university. As described by John Norton, editor of the report:

> *Seven teachers sit around a table piled high with food. "The last meal," one jokes. [Mary] Massich goes first. She hands out a proposed performance assessment in U.S. history in which students will be asked to demonstrate their understanding of a district standard, "Identify the Bill of Rights and its relevance to everyday life."*
>
> *"I'm looking for ways to make this more meaningful," Massich says. "I want everybody to read this, do their scoring, and tell me what you think." The teachers read silently through the assessment, which includes a chart students must fill in and a writing assignment, complete with a scoring rubric—a guide that tells students what Massich expects to see in their writing. Each teacher has an "assessment task rating form" which the group is continuing to refine. It links back to a more detailed document—Hoover History Department Performance Tasks—which provides a rich description of what the department expects of its students, organized under three questions: How well did students understand the content? How well did they elaborate in writing?*

*To what degree did they analyze information?*

*As each teacher calls out his or her scores for Massich's assignment, university professor and team coach Linda Whitney records them. Scores of 3 and 4 are considered good marks; scores of 1 or 2 send up warning flags. It's a sensitive time. Massich's jaw muscles tighten as she hears a string of 1s and 2s in the category "Disciplinary process: Task asks students to inquire, research, or communicate."*

*Whitney suggests they start the discussion by having Massich rate her own work. And despite a little defensiveness in her tone, she's tough on herself—it's not her first time. As the discussion progresses around the table, the teachers are both frank and supportive. The focus is on the piece of work, not on Massich herself.*

*"I have a real concern about something in your rubric," says sixth-grade teacher Alicia Estrada. "To get four points, students have to demonstrate a 'thorough understanding' of the Amendments. To get three points, they just have to demonstrate 'an understanding.' What's the difference? How do they know what 'thorough' means?"*

*And so the conservation continues, as the teachers probe the draft assignment, helping Massich sharpen her own thinking about its quality and purpose. Massich will take their feedback and refine her work substantially, she says. "I really need to think this whole piece through again."*

The Hoover teachers were ahead of most of the rest of the district in developing an ability to delve into their subject area and become critical friends to each other. Their conversation illustrates a point about standards-based teaching made by Kristi Kahl, assistant to the superintendent for middle-school reform in Long Beach. Kahl, a former history teacher, tells of observing a sixth-grade teacher's assignment in social studies: to write the name of an Egyptian god/goddess in hieroglyphics and illustrate it. The teacher proudly showed the work as fulfilling the standard in cultural anthropology to identify and compare the components of the world's major religions. Instead, Kahl saw it as an attempt to fit a long-used activity into the standards framework, something that happens

frequently as teachers take the first steps toward making their instruction standards-based. "If this teacher had the opportunity to look at this work product with her colleagues in a discussion around standards," Kahl says, "I think she would come to realize that this may not be the best assignment nor does it actually reflect the standard."

## STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS MAKE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MORE RIGOROUS AND RELEVANT

Not too long ago, professional development in Long Beach centered on a "little pink book" of short courses offered by lead teachers and others in the district with special expertise. There were some district-sponsored courses, such as early literacy acquisition or Writing to Learn, but most of the offerings were quite traditional and unfocused. Even the initial efforts to redirect professional development toward standards clung to old ideas. For example, the district staff would prepare resources that helped teachers "fit" their current resources, including textbooks, to standards.

As the pieces of standards-based reform came together, professional development became a very different experience for teachers. Long Beach principals and standards coaches now help teachers identify what they need to learn most in order to become standards-based, or the district helps schools see where they need the most help. Professional development offerings are still multiple but are now based on sound research about what is effective.

A consensus has emerged among researchers and expert practitioners concerning good professional development. It should:

- draw on the best research-based expertise in the content area
- focus on higher levels of student learning
- be consistent over time
- provide feedback to teachers
- stimulate collaborative assessment of progress among teachers

None of these elements usually exist in typical professional development opportunities. They tend to be superficial and/or canned one-shot workshops that focus on a single program or skill.

In Long Beach, teachers in each subject area now can enroll in long-term institutes sponsored by the district, either during the school year or in the summer. Some institutes during the school year bring national experts in the content areas for week-long seminars. Teachers who attended a typical two-week summer institute on Asian culture formed a study group, applied for grants to develop resources for teachers on southeast Asia (Long Beach's Cambodian enrollment is the largest in the country), and designed an advanced institute. Another form of institute releases teachers for one day of professional development every few weeks for four- or six-session units on a topic such as implementing algebra standards or literacy. Teachers try out strategies learned in each session, then debrief with their colleagues at the next session. The institutes initially enrolled teachers from the focus schools of the Clark Foundation initiative. Also, all teachers who signed up to teach in summer school in 1998 were required to attend an institute on reading across the curriculum.

Like the other districts in the Foundation's network, Long Beach must address the performance of teachers assigned to classrooms out of their fields, especially in math and science. Under the district's plan, out-of-field teachers attend at least one week-long institute, take supplemental courses covering specific facets of the relevant content area, and have access to coaches who come into the classroom.

Almost all of the Clark districts also offer one-day (or, in the summer, multi-day) opportunities for middle-grades teachers to share best practices with each other. At first, these workshops were a smorgasbord of best practices, but in some places they gradually developed a focus. Louisville's summer institutes, for example, have given participants special resources and practice in developing classroom-based performance assessments.

> *People learn best through active involvement and through thinking about and becoming articulate about what they have learned. Processes, practices, and policies built on this view of learning are at the heart of a more expanded view of teacher development that encourages teachers to involve themselves as learners—in much the same way as they wish their students would.*
>
> —**Ann Lieberman**, former professor, Teachers College, Columbia University

All of the Clark-supported districts struggle with the problem of how to get content and instructional expertise into schools and classrooms. Curriculum experts, once

offered as a service to schools, often are spread too thin or are no longer available due to large budget cuts. Districts are gradually rebuilding, sometimes with more innovative strategies than before. Long Beach decided to return to greater reliance on department chairs for leadership, providing them with special professional development so they can help teachers collaborate around student work. The district then realized it needed to redesign the job description for department chairs to make clear what will be expected of them and weed out those who only want to hand out materials. District-level coaches (three in each core subject) began working with department chairs in the 1998–99 school year to help them take the lead in establishing standards in their schools.

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JOB DESCRIPTION

LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

JOB TITLE:
**Middle School Department Chair**

TITLE OF IMMEDIATE MANAGER:
**Principal**

TITLE OF NEXT HIGHER MANAGER:
**Area Superintendent**

**PHILOSOPHY** The LBUSD instructional program is designed to ensure that all students will achieve the district content standards. These standards are aligned to the California content standards and frameworks, and are embedded in specific course outlines.

**LEADERSHIP DUTIES** Under the direction of the principal and in cooperation with the district curriculum leader and standards coach, the department chair will assist in guiding and directing the operation of the department toward the implementation of content standards.

This department chair also:

- Maintains an on-going, open dialogue with all department members. Encourages all department members to take an active role in the design, organization, and implementation of the site instructional program.

- Helps teachers understand district content standards and course outlines by coordinating the overall implementation of the site instructional program, and serving as a model of effective instructional strategies.
- Guides the department to develop, implement, and revise, as needed, grade-level articulated curriculum maps that focus on the content standards.
- Provides all department members with on-going assistance to integrate district-generated, standards-based assessment into their curricular plans.
- Provides additional support to new teachers, special education teachers, and substitutes.
- Schedules and holds regular, useful, and focused departmental meetings that include an analysis of student work. Agenda and/or minutes will be submitted to the principal and district curriculum leader.
- Facilitates study groups focused on standards-based curriculum implementation.
- Keeps the principal and district curriculum leader informed of departmental goals, accomplishments, and needs.
- Assists in the planning and implementation of the district assessment program.
- Attends district department chair meetings, as organized by the district curriculum leader.
- Circulates all pertinent information related to subject area discipline to all department members (i.e., local and state meetings, professional development workshops, district/county/state correspondence, grant opportunities), and provides necessary follow-up with all communications.

- Provides information on professional growth opportunities offered by the district, county, and state that support the content standards.
- Coordinates, inventories, and assists teachers in the distribution of curriculum notebooks and sharing of textbooks, instructional materials, and equipment and submits instructional supply requests for the department.
- Assists with other duties as requested by the principal or district curriculum leader.

Louisville developed a strategy that sent Clark Fellows into the schools to help teachers and principals. The fellows—an expert in each of the four core subject areas and one specialist in standards and assessment—are recruited directly from classrooms. They demonstrate lessons, search for the resources teachers want, form alliances of subject-matter teachers, and organize standards-based professional development. Marcia Lile, the Clark Fellow specifically assigned to work on standards-based assessments, is an award-winning former teacher who didn't wait for the district's push on standards. She integrated the geography standards into her social studies classes when those standards were first released, sought out her own professional development, and took a leadership role in the district's curriculum and standards work. Helping others create standards-based lessons and assessments is a challenge, but she is sympathetic to those new to the process. She remembers that initially, "I had to make a big shift in my thinking—from what *I'm* going to do to what *my kids* are going to do."

In Minneapolis, each middle school designated a contact teacher, who is given release time to provide staff development to colleagues on standards-based improvements. They, in turn, receive help from specialists and meet regularly to discuss progress on the focus area chosen by each school, such as reading, math, inquiry-based instruction, or portfolio assessment.

San Diego teachers who assumed a leadership role in standards-based reform—four from each school—became a sounding board for district officials on how best to support teachers and schools. The district also designed a twist to professional development, putting accountability into teachers' hands. Some schools received grants for

professional development ideas submitted by teachers. Then, two teachers from each middle school visited another school, observing a minimum of 10 classrooms and interviewing the teacher-sponsor of the professional development idea. "They are trying to find out if the school had actually done what it said it would do," according to Cat Xander, former coordinator of the Clark project. More recently, resources have been reallocated from the district office to school sites in order to tailor professional development.

The districts have learned that creating expertise within schools is a process that needs constant monitoring and evaluation. Long Beach, for example, found that department chairs often could not shift easily into the kind of leadership on standards envisioned at the district level. In Corpus Christi, the deans of instruction sometimes get sidetracked into non-leadership duties assigned by the principals; the district must constantly use pointed communication to protect the roles of the deans. The cadre teachers in Louisville, two selected by principals from each building, initially represented different levels of skill and influence within their buildings and were chosen by principals for various reasons. Districts also seem unsure about where to place these experts in the hierarchy: should they be included in principals' meetings? Should they report directly to the district office or an area office? As the next section explores, greater demands for instructional leadership shake up traditional organizations for schools.

> *Standards have given a focus to our teachers. Some teachers were resentful that some things that worked very efficiently for them had to be dropped because they were not related to standards, but newer teachers appreciate the structure. They used to lean on textbooks too much, but the standards have given them greater freedom.*
>
> —**Mike Bowles**, former principal, Stephens Middle School, Long Beach

## THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

Principals get respect in different ways in the Clark districts, depending as much on the culture and tradition of the place as on personalities. In some districts, teachers rely almost slavishly upon principals for direction, while in others they assume a collaborative relationship. Principals also are assigned to schools for various reasons, usually either to settle a school down or to shake it up.

Until recently, principals' capacity for instructional leadership counted little in their assignment or their goals. The traditional routes to the principal's office—supervisory duties and administrator certifications—did not focus on instructional aspects of running a school. It has become clear, however, that classroom instruction will become standards-based only if principals are committed to it and capable of steering toward such reforms. What is happening in the Clark districts illustrates a transformation taking place across the country in what is expected of principals. Notably, an effort by an interstate consortium sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers has codified new leadership parameters for principals and other school leaders, setting standards for their performance that in many ways parallel those established for accomplished teachers by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The Board's work has established performance assessments, based on a consensus of what accomplished teaching means, as a viable way of evaluation.

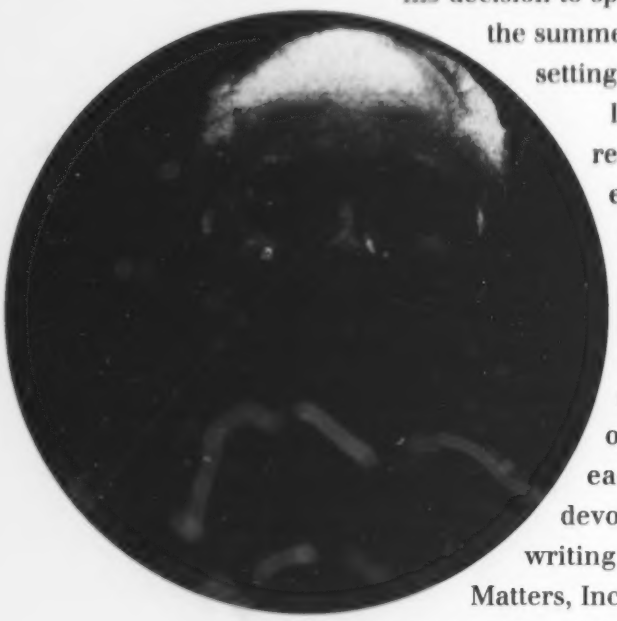
Of the six Standards for School Leaders adopted by the consortium, only one pertains to what was formerly considered a principal's core duty: management. The standards, for example, say a school leader must facilitate "the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community." This requires, among other attributes, a commitment to high standards of learning for all students and continuous school improvement. Another standard calls for a school leader to nurture and sustain an instructional program "conducive to student learning and staff professional growth."

Principals' duties once were known as the "three Bs"—budgets, buses, and boilers. The sea change occurring in the principalship—from strictly management to greater instructional leadership—is evident in the Clark districts.

In Long Beach, close relationships (and monitoring) between the three area superintendents and principals provide individual support and links between the district's goals and the performance of schools. Principals must certify that every classroom is

"providing a rigorous and challenging curriculum," requiring therefore that they know what that means instructionally. It is up to principals to decide what professional development each teacher needs. Principals learned some of the skills they need for carrying out these responsibilities at a five-day summer institute in 1997 that focused on implementing standards. More recently, principals attend monthly half-day sessions on how to evaluate reading development programs in their schools.

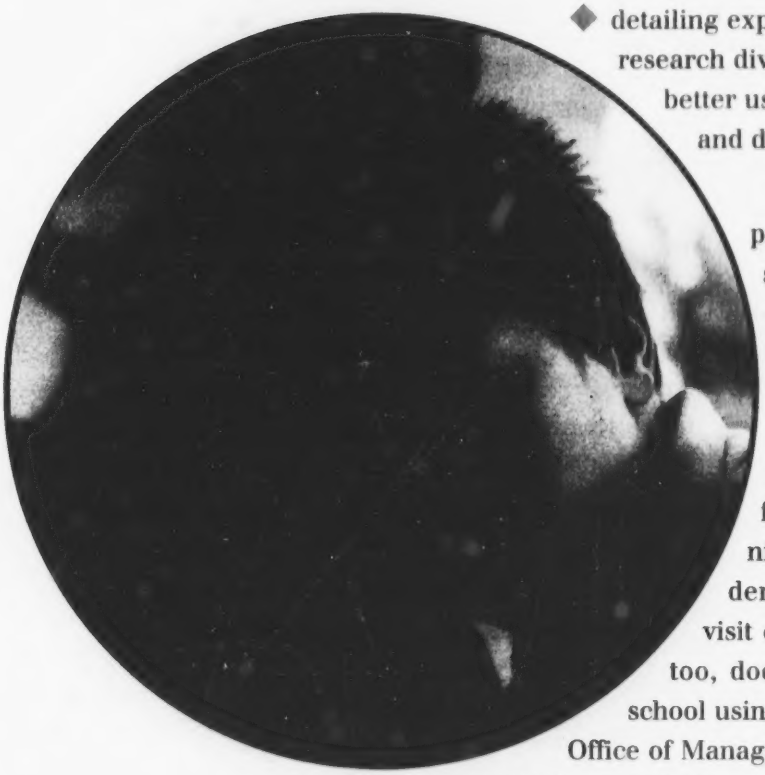
They also receive help from the district's coordinators in the four core subject areas. During the 1997 Carpe Diem, an annual middle-school conference on best practices, principals worked with an outside expert on the challenges of managing a standards-based school. For Mike Troyer, principal at Stephens Middle School, the training led to his decision to spend three weeks with his department chairs in the summer of 1998 aligning curriculum to standards and setting out an annual standards-based plan.



In Louisville, it took awhile for the district to realize that principals would never become leaders of standards-based reforms until they themselves understood standards-based teaching. Once that insight was gained, however, the district offered multiple ways for principals to become instructional leaders. They, too, attended a special program, a weekend retreat, on standards-based reforms. At least half of each monthly meeting of principals is now devoted to some aspect of standards, such as the writing process. As one principal told an Education Matters, Inc. interviewer, "We've done a lot of work in the area of writing. We've done some work in critical reading techniques and strategies. We have brought in student writing and sat down and tried to analyze it using rubrics to see what teachers are having to go through and how we could better supervise writing in class, how we would know what to look for in the working portfolios and what are the right questions to ask the teachers."

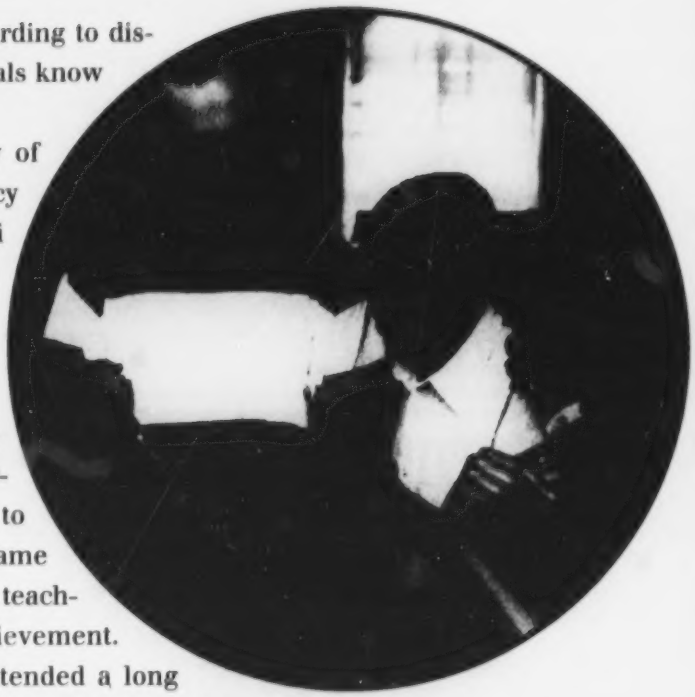
The winter/1998 issue of *Changing Schools in Louisville*, mentioned earlier, tells of other ways the district is changing principal professional development, including:

- convincing the state education department to hold regular workshops for the district's middle-school principals around raising achievement in writing and reading, as well as to strengthen each school's planning process based on standards;
- instituting "district dialogues" at all schools in the system where a panel of district leaders holds a data-driven discussion about student achievement with a school panel that includes the principal, several lead teachers, and members of the school council;
- revamping the district's principal evaluation process to make student progress central in judging each principal; and
- detailing experts in the district's research division to help schools make better use of information from state and district assessments.



In Corpus Christi, principals take part in a tightly-organized and constantly evaluated process of standards-based changes. District staff have used elaborate charts at monthly principals' meetings to instruct principals on the indicators and evidence they need to look for in evaluating instructional planning, delivery, and assessment of academic standards. When district staff visit each principal as a follow-up, they, too, document what they observe in the school using the same indicators. The district's Office of Management Information presents data to principals on end-of-year course failures and standards that

students are having trouble meeting. According to district reports, the information helps principals know where to target teachers' efforts.



In addition, the Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy at Boston College provided Corpus Christi principals with results of student surveys about standards. (According to students, the majority of teachers are still lecturing most of the time, although students believed they learn best from doing group work.) The district's Instructional Leadership Project helped principals learn how to assess classroom instruction, using the same consultant, John Samara, who worked with teachers on processes to improve student achievement. Most recently, principals and teachers attended a long workshop on assessment presented by national expert Grant Wiggins, a first step in the district's effort to reshape its assessment policies and practices.

Middle-school principals in Louisville and Corpus Christi are involved in a unique shared professional development program organized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals under a Clark Foundation grant. The process, embodying Scottish poet Robert Burns' opinion that it is a gift to see ourselves as others see us, created cohorts of principals from the two districts. The cohorts (four to six principals from each district) meet several times a year with a facilitator. They have reviewed each others' designs for improvement through the Campus Action Plans required by the district in Corpus Christi and Louisville's Consolidated Plans required by the Kentucky reforms. They also decide on a topic of interest for study, such as: How do we develop a school-wide commitment to higher literacy performance? Or, how do principals promote effective instructional team planning in middle schools? Or, what do we need to do to make teacher evaluations more meaningful and productive? Or, what is the principal's role in developing teacher efficacy?

Outside consultants spent three days "shadowing" each principal, following their

visits with a written report. The "veteran" principals, those who have been in the project since it began, received special professional development around "turning reflective thinking into practice." For the 1998–99 school year, each chose a leadership practice they would focus on in a structured way, "visioning" what should occur and who would be involved, then following their progress through regular self assessments. All principals were to be shadowed again in the spring of 1999.

According to many principals, the process is fundamentally changing their leadership. Louisville and Corpus Christi would seem to be too different for principals to discover much in common. The former district is huge: 95,000 students; Corpus Christi is modest by comparison, about 41,000 students. Hispanics represent more than half of the enrollment in the latter. Louisville has the largest concentration of urban black student enrollment in the state, but a small (though growing) language-minority population. As dissimilar as these districts are, the principals "feel each other's pain." Under pressure in each city to become instructional leaders, they are helping each other work through problems that are endemic to standards-based change.

For example, Ron Crutcher, principal at Louisville's Noe Middle School, at first questioned what he observed to be a lack of flexibility for teachers as they changed to standards-based classrooms in Corpus Christi. However, as Noe teachers began working on their school's five-year Consolidated Plan, Crutcher and assistant principal Kathy Sayre began infusing more structure into the goals for teachers and the school. The process brought the principals' interests in the two districts into closer alignment. On another issue, Corpus Christi has now launched a new look at its classroom assessment policies, spurred somewhat by observations in Louisville's schools.

Significantly, the National Association of Secondary School Principals sensed how far principals needed to go in transforming their knowledge and skills. The principals were wary of the project at first, generally feeling that it rehashed issues they already knew. They asked for more substance and time together to analyze problems that are persistent for middle-school principals in urban districts, no matter where or how large. NASSP responded with training on the reflective process and more depth to the technical assistance.

Having each other's help to identify critical issues and potential solutions is truly important to the principals, according to a report from Sue Galletti, NASSP associate executive director, who heads the project. She adds: "Almost to a person, the principals

are verbalizing and acting on the importance of maintaining a focus on long-term reform rather than seeking short-term solutions."

Galletti also notes that word is getting around about the project's success with sustained, standards-based professional study. NASSP is redesigning its own professional development based on lessons learned from the project. Three other urban district have asked the association to work with them on similar programs.

## PRINCIPALS, TEACHERS, AND DISTRICTS AS LEARNING COMMUNITIES

An essential factor to ensuring a qualified teacher in every classroom, according to the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, is a school environment that fosters and respects high-quality teaching. "A school as a community of learners" is the way the commission, a nationally prestigious panel that recommended major policy changes regarding teacher quality, describes such an environment.

Certainly, all the changes stimulated by standards-based reforms discussed so far contribute to a learning environment for teachers as well as for students. The right kind of professional development, an understanding of how to assess what students are learning, strong instructional leadership from principals—each is important in fostering collaborative professional growth.

Some schools are better than others at putting the pieces together and creating a place where teachers want to come every morning. Noe Middle School in Louisville, for example, has relied on its tradition as an innovative school from the time it first opened in the 1970s. From the start, its open-space design attracted certain kinds of teachers, those more tolerant of highly active youngsters and willing to work in teams. Many of the early teachers became leaders in the district as principals or central office administrators. Noe experiences the same teacher turnover as other schools, but an applicant must be comfortable in its atmosphere and be a team worker. "We make those things understood up front," says Assistant Principal Kathy Sayre.

By contrast, Hamilton Middle School in Long Beach suffers from a lack of stability among both staff and students. When a principal must spend as much time interviewing and hiring—even to the point of begging for—new teachers as does Cynthia Terry, Hamilton's principal, there is little time available to provide instructional leadership, although she is making headway in that department. In the 1997–98 school year, sixty

percent of the 58-member staff had less than three years of teaching experience; 14 of them were beginning teachers. The district brought more stability to Hamilton in 1998–99 by assigning four subject-area coaches to the school four days each week.

In both schools, standards and classroom-embedded assessments rallied teachers around a new purpose and cohesion. In Noe's case, these new ideas prompted some needed soul-searching and review. At Hamilton, they provided a focus for experienced teachers to help new ones.

A RAND study of teachers whose students made progress on Kentucky's KIRIS state assessments found that these teachers embraced the reforms. They participated in workshops on writing standards and performance assessments to help their schools, not just their students. They brought back what they learned from these state-sponsored workshops and sessions, stimulated discussion with colleagues, and put other teachers in touch with information on research and best practices.

Interviewers for Education Matters, Inc. found the same attitudes among teachers at Long Beach's Stanford Middle School, which they cite as an excellent example of a school faculty committed to sustaining a learning community for themselves as well as their students. The science teachers, for example, worried about developing an in-depth understanding of science concepts, considering how many concepts needed to be covered. The Education Matters report notes, "the department has developed a year-long calendar, and teachers are always checking in with each other about their progress and their struggles."

The districts have done a number of things to help teachers become learners and share their expertise with colleagues. In addition to their work on standards and assessment committees, teachers participate in a range of opportunities for professional growth which include:

- alliances in each content area, organized by the Clark Fellows in Louisville, to bring teachers together regularly around best practice and research information;
- use of teacher leaders in each school to demonstrate and advise teachers on standards-based teaching, such as the cadre teachers in Louisville, the deans of instruction in Corpus Christi, the contact teachers in Minneapolis and the increased development of and networking for department chairs in Long Beach as well as the district's standards coaches; these training-leaders-to-train-others efforts have their limits, but they at least expose a core of teachers to standards-based reforms;
- opportunities for teachers from across a district to score student work together, thus helping them to learn how to create standards-based lessons and develop rubrics, as in San Diego, Long Beach, and Louisville;
- professional development focusing on standards-based reform, replacing diffused, misdirected investments that did not contribute to a school's vision or a teacher's particular needs (site-based decision-making could have been a barrier to this development, but accountability for state or district standards has helped schools achieve a balance in this area); this is very evident in Long Beach and Louisville, but also the mode in the other districts;
- grants for teachers to conduct small-scale research projects related to student learning within their schools and share their findings with colleagues, as in San Diego, Minneapolis, and Long Beach;
- opportunities to learn how to analyze data generated by schools and use the analyses for school improvement, as in Minneapolis, San Diego, and Louisville.

## STANDARDS PROVIDE STABILITY

Stability and consistency are crucial to creating learning communities within schools and also within districts.

Through a planning year and the first two years of the new Clark project, superintendents changed in three of the six districts, and new principals took over in four of the six focus schools. During the initial Clark initiative, similar turnovers devastated long-range planning: for the 12 schools in that project, 26 principals passed through in a five-year period. Yet turnover is accepted as inevitable in urban districts, a function of the scarcity of teachers and highly qualified principal candidates and of burnout among administrators.

In the current Clark districts, however, transitions seem to be less chaotic, for which some credit must be given to the superintendents' commitments to standards-based reforms. Among the first policies pushed by Jesse Register when he became superintendent of the merged Chattanooga and Hamilton County school systems was principal responsibility for five-year improvement plans. Standards-based instruction is one of three required components of every plan.

Similarly, when Carol Johnson took the helm of the Minneapolis public schools, she immediately implemented reading and math initiatives aimed at improving the performance of the district's students on state standards. Additionally, Johnson incorporated standards in the district improvement agenda and told principals that their school improvement plans needed to emphasize achieving standards as well as providing remediation for students failing to meet them. And the new leadership in San Diego is designing professional development around standards-based reforms.

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# CHANGING ASSESSMENTS, BEING ACCOUNTABLE

*If I [a student] am to put out serious effort, I need to know that I will be evaluated fairly, and that those evaluations will be honored and respected. There is more to fairness than the simple absence of bias in tests and examinations. Fair evaluations are also transparent. Their content is known in advance; they can be systematically and effectively studied for. In America today, students rarely have the experience of studying hard to pass an examination that they know counts in the world and for which they have been systematically prepared by teachers who themselves understand what is to be examined.*

*Local tests and exams, usually made up by teachers and administrators at the end of teaching units or marking periods, may appear to contradict my claim. Students can study for those, and they are clearly related to the taught curriculum. But, especially for students from poor schools, those tests do not really "count." They are not credible to the world at large. It is understood that an A or a B in an inner city school does not equal the same grade in an upscale suburban or private school.*

*A credible evaluation system, one that will evoke sustained effort by students and teachers throughout the system, must evaluate students from all kinds of schools against the same criteria. It must include some externally set exams graded by people other than the students' own teachers, along with an external quality control of grades based on classwork (as in an audited portfolio graded system)."*

—**Lauren Resnick**, researcher and developer of New Standards reference examinations, Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh

Teachers teach to the test. That truism existed long before the current drumbeat for accountability placed such enormous stock in test scores. Not that teachers were able to pay much attention to standardized test scores: the scores usually reached teachers after the students tested had moved on to another grade, and the tests themselves rarely matched the teachers' curriculum. Yet they were necessary for public accounting at all levels. Title I, the federal government program of compensatory education for disadvantaged students, requires all states to have new assessment systems based on their standards by the year 2000.

Even before this requirement many states had been strengthening their interest and role in accountability. Thus, teaching to the state test has become even more essential, in the view of those at the classroom level, because the issue is survival (survival of schools) and even of jobs. The Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) and the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) pervade conversations and classroom attention for at least part of each school year. Test results in these states can put schools on official notice for improvement, a strategy that both shames and provides extra help to schools. Teachers in Chattanooga at the beginning of this documentation paid great attention to the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP), along with a writing assessment, with the results analyzed for the "value added" by each teacher. Testing at every grade level allows the state to gather data on improvements in learning of the same students from one year to the next. Now, teachers must switch their focus because the state scrapped TCAP and adopted the commercially produced TerraNova, an assessment with much more critical thinking and performance requirements.

Teachers in San Diego were preparing to implement TerraNova when California mandated another test—the Stanford 9—and left the district's chosen test shrink-

wrapped in storage. Results from the Stanford 9 will be used to publicly rank each school. In Minneapolis, a new state assessment program requiring students to achieve passing scores on reading and math tests for graduation jolted the district's ordinarily careful process for change. In 1997, only 15 percent of black students and 19 percent of Hispanic students met the requirement of a passing score of 75 percent in reading and math, compared with 60 percent or more of white students. Scores improved only slightly in 1998.

One can argue that such assessments are so fraught with validity issues that they are unfair methods for judging schools and teachers. On the other hand, such tools as KIRIS and TAAS are credited with forcing schools and teachers to "get it together" and focus more closely on what students should learn. Both these state assessments are now under review, the former undergoing redesign by legislative order, the latter being rewritten to reflect newly adopted higher standards.

In Corpus Christi, where the district's action plan specifies that all students will "gain the expected incremental increases in Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) performance," the standards are in flux. Bernadine Cervantes, former principal of South Park Middle School, said that standards-based reforms had turned conversations away from a rigid emphasis on TAAS and toward higher thinking skills. South Park's current principal, Lucio Calzada, believes TAAS standards are too low. Yet teachers do what they think they need to do to help students achieve the requisite scores. One teacher who was observed several times for this report started each class with a TAAS-related opening activity. An example of the drills students were expected to endure—Question: "Anything wrong with this sentence?" Answer: "The title of the movie is not underlined." It is no wonder that researchers and teachers themselves are critical of the emphasis on TAAS in the weeks preceding the test.

The TAAS scores of the district continue to improve, but some question whether the improvement is due to TAAS practice or to attempts by district officials and consultants to move teachers' instruction toward higher order thinking skills. According to John Samara, a district consultant, attention to higher order thinking is what will most improve TAAS scores, and he focused teachers on designing interdisciplinary units that require critical thinking. However, the district most recently brought in a national expert on student assessments, Grant Wiggins, to stretch its thinking beyond TAAS.

In Louisville, KIRIS has equally dominated teachers' classroom priorities. Because of

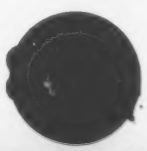
their KIRIS scores, half the middle schools in Louisville were classified as "in decline" or failing to meet their benchmark scores in 1997. One K-8 school was classified as "in crisis" and received strict interventions. As a result, somewhat uniform efforts to improve student achievement occurred in all schools with the cohesion supplied by "distinguished educators" assigned to the schools by the state to help them develop and implement improvement plans. Nonetheless, Cheryl DeMarsh, director of the Clark project in Louisville, kept insisting that implementation of performance standards in the classrooms was critical to helping students reach the level required by the Kentucky reforms (proficiency, or the third highest level out of four). Thus, much of the professional development in Louisville has focused on developing performance tasks and assessments to complement the district's content and performance standards. The KIRIS scores might have been a "wake-up call," but the response has increasingly focused on the broad goals of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) rather than the limited scope of the KIRIS assessment.

Louisville also uses diagnostic testing of all students scoring in the lowest, or novice, category on KIRIS. The testing reveals what skills they lack and helps teachers know where to intervene to address these shortcomings.

## MOVING FROM TESTING TO ASSESSMENT

In California, chaos over assessment policy did not serve districts and teachers well. The state test, the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS), stimulated attention to higher standards and assessment strategies that told educators much more than traditional tests about how well schools were meeting the standards defined in the state's curriculum frameworks. Yet several controversial questions on the assessment itself and the failure of the system to generate scores for individual students led former Governor Pete Wilson to eliminate funding for the test several years ago. Districts were left adrift about what assessment to use. Not until 1998, when the administration of the Stanford-9 commercial test was implemented, did the state again have an assessment system, one very different from CLAS.

Long Beach relied on a test developed by a consortium of school districts that was similar to CLAS as a fill-in until it could design a new assessment system. Lynn Winters, a national researcher on assessment issues, put her background to work as the new assistant superintendent for research, planning, and evaluation and helped to develop



a three-pronged assessment system. It includes: the new Stanford-9 (given in grades 3-11); district-wide written performance assessments in science, history, and writing; and classroom-embedded assessments in the four core subjects. If Long Beach teachers, like teachers in the other Clark districts, are going to teach to the test, then Winters is trying to make sure the tests themselves are geared toward pushing students and teachers higher.

Winters insists that tests should be designed for specific purposes: one test cannot do all that is needed in assessment. The Stanford-9 provides public accountability for meeting norm-referenced standards, those that compare performance to a national sample. This is a political requirement, but it doesn't tell Long Beach educators or community members about progress on the district's own performance standards. As explained by Winters, the state test will add new items each year, making it almost impossible to do long-term comparisons. Also, because the test is "secure," the district cannot analyze items that would give information about student performance.

The district therefore needs its own performance assessments. After some piloting, district-wide assessments in science and history designed by teachers and curriculum specialists were given for the first time in the spring of 1998. Although the first administration did not go as smoothly as had been hoped, it still achieved its purpose. In science, all students watched the same videos, such as a candle burning, and then did observational writing to describe the phenomenon. In history, students were given original-source documents to read and asked to write an essay on cause and effect regarding westward expansion. The assessments were graded twice—by teachers in the content area and by language arts teachers. The science papers actually went through a second read for students originally scoring a three or above on a six-level scale. In the opinion of Susan Starbuck, the district's literacy curriculum leader for grades 6-12, the assessments demanded more of students than previous tests of their writing. "In these middle-school years, they just can't sit there and write personal histories all the time," she says, noting that students had to use rich sources of information in the assessment. The district had expected to find a lot of level twos in the focus schools, "but we didn't, because the kids were really trying," she says. Long Beach is continuing to refine the process, especially in science, where few students were able to demonstrate proficiency. It has triggered much conversation among science and language arts teachers about scientific writing.

The third component of the district's assessment plan is the development of classroom-embedded performance assessments. "One of the most important lessons we have learned," the district reported to the Clark Foundation in December 1997, "is that the determination of whether students are meeting standards will eventually have to be done at the classroom level.... The standards are far too complex to be assessable with the amount of testing time available for district-level tests. Thus, we have shifted our work from creating more district assessments to creating district scoring guides and model tasks that would provide some standardization at the classroom level without being completely secure, standardized tests." This began with math portfolios in the 1998–99 school year; other subjects were to be added later.

The hope is that as teachers become more adept at classroom assessments based on standards, their scoring will become more reliable. Eventually, an A will mean the same district-wide because teachers will have incorporated the classroom assessments and scoring into their evaluations. At that point, papers pulled from daily work ought to indicate the level of student work, and district-wide performance assessments may become unnecessary. To support teachers in making this transformation, the district is working with teachers to develop scoring guides and sets of "anchor papers" illustrating student work at each different level.

In this way, the district will build a portfolio of different ways students can demonstrate their knowledge, according to Chris Dominguez, assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and professional development. In science, for example, the assessment activities might include writing, conducting actual experiments, and answering "enhanced" multiple-choice questions, ones where students must explain their answers. The content-specific teacher institutes offered by the district give teachers experience creating performance assessments. The district's professional development plan follows up the institutes with sessions focused on specific modules of the content and more opportunities to create performance tasks.

A recent comment by Stephens Middle School Principal Mike Troyer indicates that the philosophy behind the district's assessment policy is taking hold among teachers. His teachers, he says, are "much more concerned about how their kids did on the performance assessments than on the Stanford-9."

District leaders acknowledge, however, that teachers' traditional attitudes toward district inquiries into classroom practice remain a barrier to an effective classroom-

based assessment system. Additional professional conversations with teachers will be necessary to make it clear that the classroom performance portfolios are not an "add-on" task but part of good standards-based teaching practice.

One of the most important benefits of the assessment systems being developed among the districts is the opportunity for teachers to develop, pilot test, and score the assessments. It is a hands-on way for teachers to judge student work together. As teachers who scored portfolios in San Diego found out, many assignments and many examples of excellent student writing were not acceptable because they did not address the standards.

> *One of the things that we learned this summer as a result of the scoring is that the scoring process gave teachers a chance to really internalize what it meant to respond to literature and to respond to informational text. And when they actually looked at the student work and scored, they began to see the relationship between the assignments that were given and the work that the students produced.*
>
> —**Karen Bachofer**, portfolio initiative coordinator, San Diego, quoted in a February 1998 report from Education Matters, Inc.

## ACCOUNTABILITY FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Building an assessment system is only part of the story. Using data generated by the assessment to stimulate action is the other half. In Texas, California, and Kentucky, student assessment scores are reported with the information disaggregated, separated out in several ways, including race/ethnicity and gender. The Kentucky reports also disaggregate by level of competence (novice, apprentice, proficient, or advanced). The Louisville schools now provide schools with detailed student performance data and arrange sessions where district testing experts coach principals and teachers in analyzing the data.

As part of her accountability plan that preceded the state's new assessment, former San Diego Superintendent Bertha Pendleton required data to be disaggregated and then went on to require that schools show progress in all racial sub-groups of students. The new superintendent is continuing this plan. Schools that fail to make progress could be

put on a list of schools receiving "interventions" and eventually sanctions, such as replacing teachers, if they do not improve.

Pershing Middle School's test scores are fairly high and some teachers had become complacent, according to Principal Mary Jo Asbury. Then she showed teachers the disaggregated scores. Only 35 percent of black students attained a score at or above the fiftieth percentile in reading in 1995, compared with 82 percent of white students. Reading levels also were low among Hispanic students. The school ranked eighteenth out of 22 middle schools overall, and Asbury was relieved and surprised that Pershing was not among the schools cited for intervention in the first list by the district. "The staff was still not ready to say that the problem of minority student achievement is at the school," says Asbury. "But I asked them: 'Why were we so low?' This accountability system doesn't care about excuses."

Now aware that the school could not let failing students continue to fail, the staff decided to hire a reading teacher and to use the Accelerated Reader program with low-performing students and the First Steps diagnostic program in sixth grade. Teachers took on extra tutoring sessions for low-performing students, and Asbury set up training for department chairs on reading strategies to use with second-language learners.

Minneapolis collects a great deal of data on students, supplemented by results of the state-mandated Minnesota basic skills tests, usually given during the eighth grade. But what use is the information if teachers do not find it accessible or relevant? To address this issue, Walt Haney and Michael Russell of the Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy at Boston College worked with teachers at two sites to use the data, especially data on low-performing students, for school improvement planning. A half-dozen teachers at Northeast and Anthony middle schools in Minneapolis volunteered

for the project, funded by a grant from the Clark Foundation. The teachers developed case studies of individual students and used the DataDisk software program, downloading student data from the district's mainframe computer.

Although the project is exploratory, the information the teachers discovered in the data stimulated important questions:

- What should we do about students who score lower than they should on standardized tests because they can't deal with distractions around them during testing?
- How do we motivate students to try harder on tests if they believe the tests are low-stake and not important to them?
- Why do black students tend to receive lower grade-point averages than white students even though their math scores are the same on standardized tests?
- Why do males tend to perform higher on math tests than females even when their grade-point averages are the same?
- Regardless of the reading test score level one year, why did black students systematically have lower reading test scores the next year?

While the findings are quite specific to individual schools and students in the case studies, the project provoked lively discussion among the teachers as they sought to explain the results. Haney reports that leaders emerged in both groups of teachers, those willing to learn the technical details of using regression analysis with computerized data and to help their colleagues further explore the hows and whys of student test results. The district is now working on developing a master data file for each school, combining district and school-level information in a computerized database accessible to all principals and teachers, as well as the central office.

With a grant from the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project, three middle schools in Long Beach formed an evaluation task force to train teachers to collect and interpret data and design surveys. One of their tasks will be to disaggregate data for the teachers in their schools, helping them find out which aspects of their instruction are most effective at reaching all students. For principals and site-based councils, the data

analysis can tell them about the effectiveness of particular programs, such as gifted and talented or special education.

Often, principals and teachers insist that non-school factors, such as student mobility or the percentage of limited English proficient students, have a decisive effect on outcomes. In a report to the Foundation, Long Beach district assessment officials noted that more sophisticated analyses using disaggregated data "can be used to confirm (but more commonly disconfirm) these commonly held beliefs."

## CONSISTENT ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability for student results loses its punch if the inevitable turnover in school and district leadership sends different signals to schools about district priorities. While research is needed to determine any causal relationship, the presence of a standards-based focus in the Clark districts seems to keep the momentum for accountability going.

Alan Bersin, an "outsider" to public education who was plucked from the U.S. Attorney's office to head San Diego's schools, did his homework by interviewing reformers, researchers, and administrators around the country before announcing a new management structure in June 1998. Focusing on instruction, Bersin appointed Anthony (Tony) Alvarado, superintendent of New York City's Community School District 2, as chancellor of instruction in San Diego. Alvarado has earned a national reputation for improving student achievement in a highly diverse district through comprehensive professional development. He planned to build on the district's standards and accountability system, adding his own strong focus on quality of teaching.

Having standards and an ongoing program of professional development in place also minimizes the typical upheaval when a new principal comes into a school. Any principal needs time to learn how staff members work together, but for Luis Calzada at South Park in Corpus Christi and Mike Troyer at Stephens in Long Beach, the work of previous principals on standards paved the

way for a smooth transition. Priorities had already been set. Calzada is in classrooms constantly. "My teachers tell me they have seen me more than any other principal," he reports, but they understand his purpose is to document and give feedback to them on their implementation of academic standards (he enters data from each classroom visit on his laptop computer, presenting teachers with individual files at evaluation time).

Troyer also stepped into an environment where teachers were accustomed to sharing their ideas on research about learning and standards-based classrooms. At one faculty meeting, for example, they discussed the long-range impact of standards, suggesting that perhaps they should study an ungraded organization because many students may not meet standards in a single year. Troyer left teaching for more than 10 years to become a real estate broker, an occupation where he learned the value of constant retraining. When he came to Stephens after being vice principal at another middle school, his job, he says, was "to go out and find the professional development teachers need for standards-based classrooms." The previous principal, Mike Bowles, had started the momentum for change, Troyer points out, by "hiring teachers who wanted to learn and who accepted the reforms."

In some districts, however, the most powerful contributor to stability is attention to a standards-based reporting system for students and parents—perhaps the most radical change of all. The mobility of students, especially among those whose families have the lowest incomes, either wrecks assessment systems or causes schools to cry foul when they are held responsible for poor results on standardized tests. In many systems, the lowest-performing students often show mobility rates of 30 percent or higher. Yet if students are expected to reach the same standards no matter where they are, teachers and students will have "no alibis," as one district noted.

Once teachers delve into school-wide standards efforts, they begin to realize the disjuncture between traditional forms of grading and reporting student progress and the forms that prevail in a standards-based system.

In a faculty meeting at South Park, for example, when teachers were asked to make recommendations to the district on a new grading system, the dilemmas were apparent. Earlier, the district had developed a pilot standards-based report card, but it ran into opposition from many teachers and parents. So the district went back to the drawing board. The South Park teachers rejected a pass-fail system because "it won't really tell students how they are doing." They discussed the idea of requiring students to meet all

standards in language arts and math (12 a year in each subject) and maintain a grade of 70 in all other subjects and electives in order to be promoted. "But think of what we're saying here," commented then-principal Bernadine Cervantes. "If students come here weak in science and social studies from the elementary grades and we don't make them meet performance standards, then they will really be weak by the time they get to high school." The faculty finally agreed to recommend that students be required to meet all core academic performance standards and have a final overall average of 70 in electives. The district policy now requires students to pass all standards for promotion. San Diego is also planning to pilot a standards-based report card, now that grade-level standards are in place.

Determining the value of grades—and holding that value constant from one school to the next—opens up a host of issues having to do with teachers' views of their students and their teaching. Before standards-based reforms, many teachers with low-performing students took effort into consideration when grading students, believing a boost in self-esteem could help achievement. Teachers still do this, but if effort does not lead to more learning, is a higher grade really helping a student? Districts such as Corpus Christi and Long Beach believe the answer is no. Corpus Christi issued grading guidelines and scoring criteria at the same time it disseminated revised academic standards to teachers and parents. Long Beach anticipates that its work on selected classroom-based assessment tasks will eventually yield "anchors" for determining course grades. The process, district officials stress, is evolutionary but still could be derailed by the need to spend classroom time preparing students for the SAT-9. Teachers just may not be able to cope well with a situation where the state test does not fully complement what the district believes students should know and be able to do.

# STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS AS TEACHERS SEE THEM: A SURVEY

Standards-based reform is essentially about improving teachers and teaching. A national movement toward that goal can be seen in efforts to recruit more diverse and capable candidates for teaching, align teacher preparation with performance standards, establish higher qualifications for licensing and certifying teachers, improve the quality of professional development, and recognize outstanding teaching. In many states, these initiatives are being pursued simultaneously through comprehensive policies that will assure, within the decade, "a competent and caring" teacher in every classroom, according to the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future.

The commission adds another piece to quality teaching—a school environment that supports it. Do teachers have the instructional leadership they need? Do they have time to work together? Do they have access to expert help in expanding their skills and knowledge?

To get a snapshot of what teachers bring to their efforts and what the teaching environment is like, we distributed a survey to all teachers in each of the six schools followed for this report: Stephens Middle School in Long Beach; Pershing Middle School in San Diego; Noe Middle School in Louisville; South Park Middle School in Corpus Christi; Franklin Middle School in Minneapolis; and East Lake Middle School in Chattanooga. Between 33 and 56 percent of teachers responded in each school.

Barnett Berry, associate director of the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, prepared the survey and analyzed the results. From the data, he draws several broad observations.

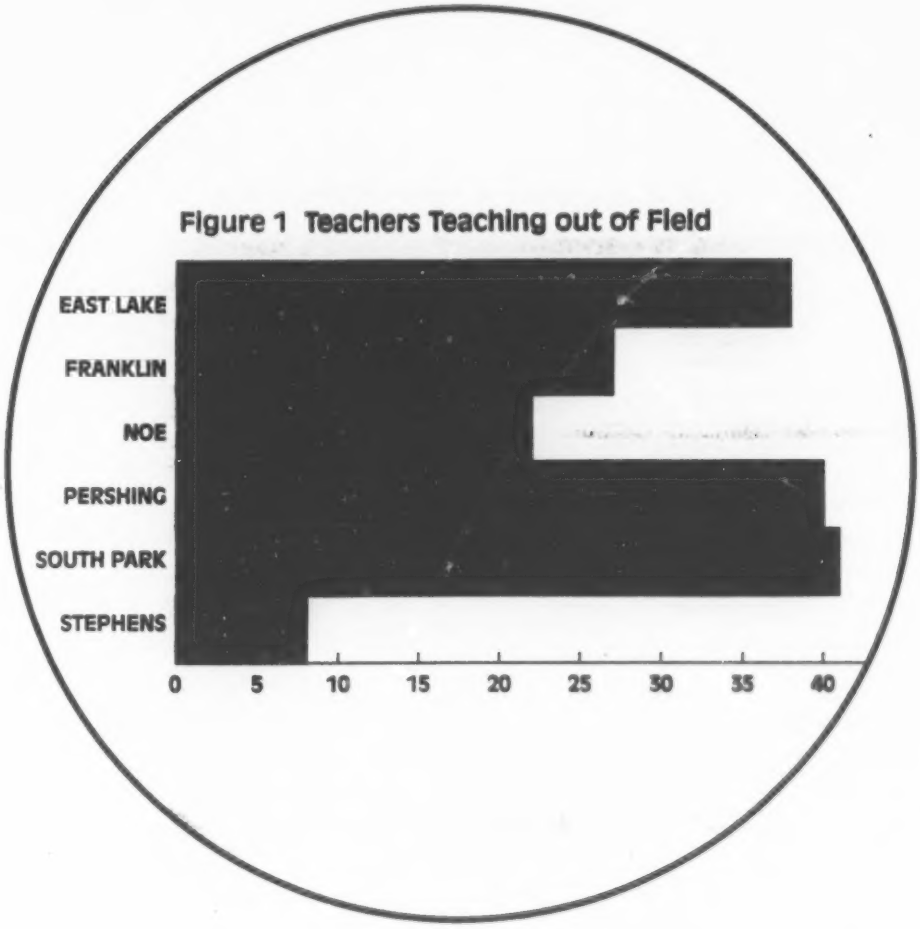
- Most teachers—especially those who are "relatively" well prepared in their fields—call for new forms of professional development. (The word "relatively" is used because no one seemed confident about working with lower achieving and special education students, a finding confirmed in early 1999 in a report released by the U.S. Department of Education.) It appears that the more teachers know, the more they want to know.

- A significant portion of teachers call for professional development that helps them develop standards-based lessons, and some even ask specifically for more analysis of student work. At the same time, a large share of teachers (about 75 percent) say they have analyzed their students' work in light of teaching or learning standards. This ambiguity reflects some confusion among teachers about standards and the process of using student work to examine practice.

- Teachers teaching outside their fields are less likely than in-field teachers to agree that their students can "reach the new middle school standards [their] district has established."

## OUT-OF-FIELD TEACHING

In each of the focus schools, a sizeable share of the teachers who answered the survey were teaching at least one class outside their fields. Out-of-field teachers include, for example, social studies majors who are teaching math, language arts teachers teaching social studies, and elementary teachers teaching science, as well as emergency credential teachers.




These out-of-field teachers present special challenges for standards-based reform, particularly for staff development. Research conducted for the development of assessments used by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is based on the belief that good teachers use a pedagogy that is specific to their subject. In other words, knowing content is not enough. Teachers also must master a content-specific pedagogy if they wish to teach well. Out-of-field teachers are less likely to have this base. They also may not be committed to acquiring it because in the fickle scheduling process used in many middle schools, they may be teaching another subject next year.

## IN-SCHOOL AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL PLANNING TIME

Asked to estimate the time they spend each week on in-school planning, teachers in each school report an average of between 4.7 and 6.8 hours. Their estimates of the time they spend on planning outside school range from 8 to 12 hours per week.

A closer look at how teachers spend those hours provides some interesting insights. For example, although Stephens teachers report spending an average of 5.3 hours on

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Figure 2
**Teachers' Estimates of In-School Planning Time Each Week**

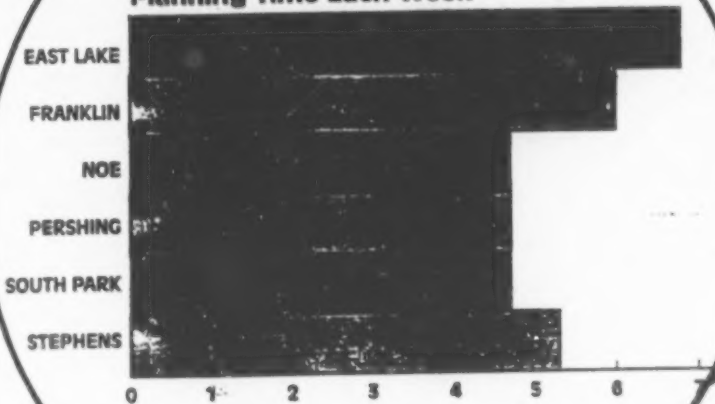
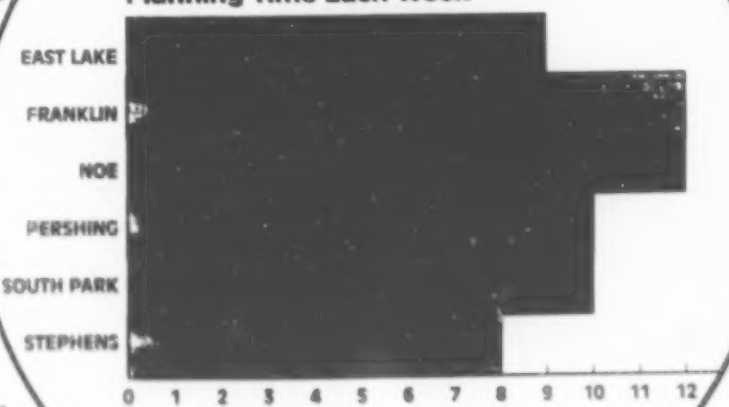



Figure 3
**Teachers' Estimates of Out-Of-School Planning Time Each Week**




planning during school—more than teachers spend in three of the schools—they use almost a quarter of that time for "logistics," including copying, filing, and other similar tasks. About 35 percent of their in-school planning time is spent working with colleagues to discuss students they jointly teach, examine their work, or develop interdisciplinary lessons or new curricula. Teachers at Noe, by contrast, spend only 10 percent of their time on logistics and 43 percent working with colleagues; Noe teachers also report spending about 18 percent of their time in contacts with parents. At East Lake, which reports the largest number of in-school planning hours, teachers noted that most of their time was spend on paperwork and administrative requirements.

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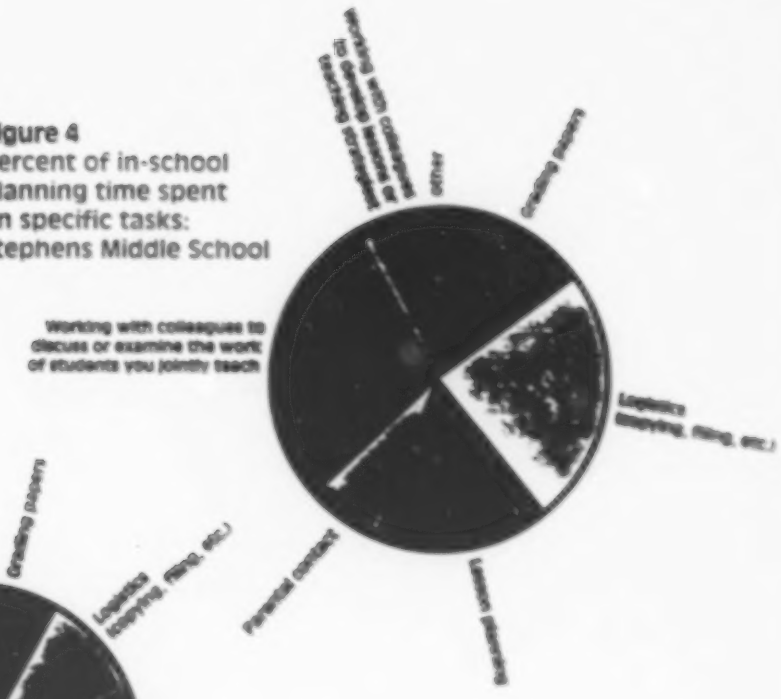


**Figure 4**
Percent of in-school planning time spent on specific tasks: Stephens Middle School

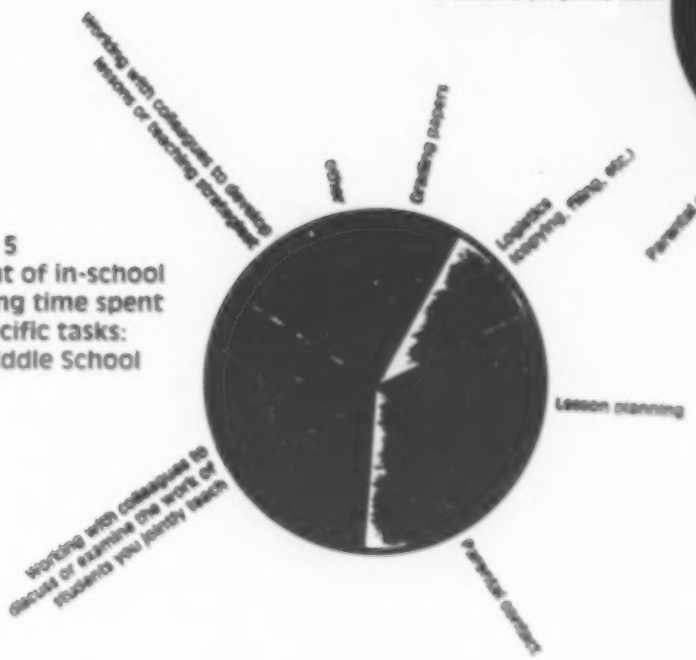


**Figure 5**
Percent of in-school planning time spent on specific tasks: Noe Middle School

An important distinction can be drawn between tasks that teachers perform individually—including grading papers, logistics, and lesson planning—and those that involve interactions with colleagues. Standards-based reform demands that teachers have better opportunities to work collaboratively, both across disciplines and with others in a content area. Teachers need more time to discuss the progress of individual students, examine student work, and develop new lessons, strategies, and curricula.

Outside school, teachers are even more unlikely to work together. Except for those at East Lake (most of whom were replaced by a new principal in the 1998–99 school year), who reported spending a third of out-of-school hours on collaborative tasks, teachers said they spend between 11 and 20 percent of their time before or after school

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collaborating with colleagues—or an average of 1–2 hours per week.

The narrative responses reveal that a great majority of teachers are looking for content-specific, lesson-based professional development that involves working with colleagues on standards-based reform. Importantly, the teachers who were most vocal about the need for these changes tended to be either well trained and experienced or inexperienced but from university preparation programs that have adopted reforms.

## ATTITUDES TOWARD STANDARDS-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING

One section of the survey consisted of a series of seven statements about teachers' fundamental attitudes toward standards-based reform and their experiences so far. Their responses reveal a great deal about the level of agreement—or disagreement—within a school about the reforms being implemented in their districts. In addition, many teachers supplemented their answers with written comments.

**1. I have a good understanding of standards-based middle school reform.**

| | Agree | Somewhat agree | Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|
| East Lake | 33 | 67 | 00 |
| Franklin | 53 | 42 | 05 |
| Noe | 63 | 30 | 07 |
| Pershing | 45 | 41 | 14 |
| South Park | 43 | 39 | 19 |
| Stephens | 50 | 50 | 00 |

Most teachers indicated they had at least a fairly good understanding of standards-based reforms, although there was stronger disagreement at Pershing and South Park. The schools have used a variety of means to educate their teachers about such

reforms, and the survey responses show it. Consensus about what is standards-based reform, however, appears to be somewhat elusive, with differences emerging based on the departments in which teachers teach, experience, access to colleagues, and even schools of education that teachers may have attended.

Almost 20 percent of the teachers at South Park disagree with the statement(that they have a good understanding of standards-based reforms). No one at Stephens does. The diversity of opinion at Noe is reflected in two teacher comments. One wrote, "We have gotten so much junk lately, I don't know what is called what. My department is not very good at telling us what is happening." Another commented, "We have had many opportunities to receive good professional development. The standards are more specific and help me rely less on the textbook. I see students interested."

A South Park teacher raised the issue of comparable grading practices: "Yes, I know about the standards, but I am against them because schools still grade so differently. Some allow kids to make up tests and meet standards while others do not." The responses also reveal some teachers' beliefs about children. One angry South Park teacher noted, "Standards are only good for showing kids that they failed. Improvements can only come from the home."

**2. Standards are useful for improving academic performance for all students.**

| | Agree | Somewhat agree | Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|
| East Lake | 67 | 33 | 00 |
| Franklin | 61 | 35 | 04 |
| Noe | 53 | 37 | 10 |
| Pershing | 41 | 45 | 14 |
| South Park | 48 | 30 | 22 |
| Stephens | 50 | 30 | 20 |

While there is far more agreement than disagreement with the statement, the survey response revealed a number of misconceptions held about standards and their purpose. This item seemed to bring to the surface teachers' beliefs regarding whether students can meet the standards as well as how much more teachers need to know about standards. Before indicting recalcitrant teachers, it would be useful to know how much opportunity they have to learn about standards and how well the system supports such learning through mandates, incentives, and capacity-building policies.

Again, this question inspired a number of negative responses about teaching, learning, and students. One South Park teacher claimed, "I think standards are great for teachers, giving them guidance as to what to teach. They are bad for students because all the standards seem to do is to tell them what is the least amount of work they need to do to pass." A teacher at Noe claimed, "standards are developed for students unlike mine."

On the other hand, a teacher at Pershing saw considerable value in standards: "They give all students equal opportunity to meet high standards... and the rubrics help students see what they need to do and how well they must do it." At Franklin, a teacher noted that standards were useful "only if they are clear to teachers, students, and parents. There are many students who need more than just standards to improve their achievement. Too many kids have too many needs. It is not the standards as much as the teacher and what he or she knows. We don't know enough."

**3. I have received adequate preparation to use standards and standards-based assessments in my classroom.**

| | Agree | Somewhat agree | Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|
| East Lake | 22 | 22 | 33 |
| Franklin | 16 | 66 | 17 |
| Noe | 53 | 27 | 20 |
| Pershing | 36 | 23 | 36 |
| South Park | 15 | 57 | 26 |
| Stephens | 22 | 39 | 39 |

Although Pershing and Stephens show disturbingly high levels of disagreement with this statement, disagreement at Noe and Franklin is relatively low. Perhaps significantly, Noe and Franklin also had the lowest numbers of out-of-field teachers.

At Stephens, one teacher noted, "I have received a copy of the standards—that's all. I once attended a half day standards seminar where all we did was read through the standards." Yet even when standards training is perceived to be there, it is often insufficient. "Although I have received much training about the standards," one teacher noted, "I have not had much training in assessment of the standards." A new teacher at Pershing called for a strong commitment to professional development: "I feel I should have had three to four months working with experts writing curriculum." A Franklin teacher reported, "Preparation is not as much of an issue as time to implement what we know (and what we have been trained to do)."

**4. I have made significant changes in my teaching because of standards-based middle school reform.**

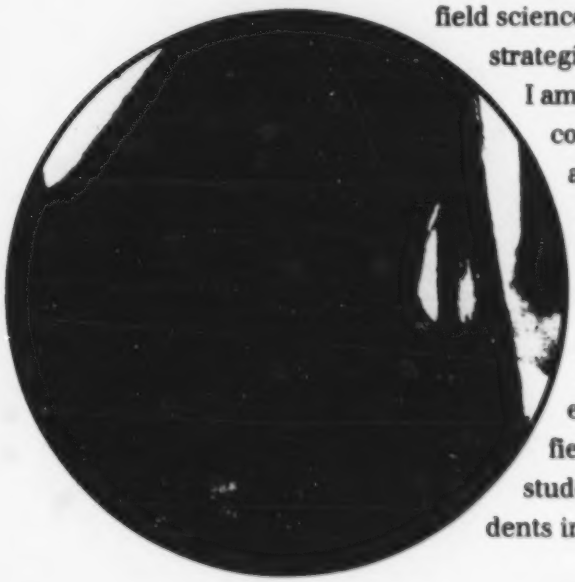
| | Agree | Somewhat agree | Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|
| East Lake | 11 | 67 | 22 |
| Franklin | 21 | 36 | 43 |
| Noe | 33 | 40 | 27 |
| Pershing | 28 | 48 | 24 |
| South Park | 40 | 45 | 15 |
| Stephens | 06 | 62 | 33 |

This item produced more negative reactions and less agreement than most of the questions. At Franklin, one teacher explained, "These reforms will take a lot of work outside of school, and this means sacrificing time from your family... So far, time spent is the most significant change." Another wrote, "Most changes have been procedural... I am better than before—but there is still much to learn." "How can you make all these changes when you teach as many students as we do?" asked one teacher.

**5. I can pinpoint evidence that standards-based teaching practices have resulted in my students performing at higher academic levels.**

| | Agree | Somewhat agree | Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|
| East Lake | 22 | 33 | 22 |
| Franklin | 07 | 36 | 54 |
| Noe | 23 | 40 | 37 |
| Pershing | 14 | 38 | 48 |
| South Park | 20 | 45 | 35 |
| Stephens | 12 | 38 | 50 |

This question invited even higher levels of disagreement, and more teachers chose not to answer. A science teacher with 32 years of classroom experience retorted, "I don't have time to pinpoint evidence." At a different school, a well-prepared, in-field science teacher with an advanced degree said, "The reading strategies I was taught in college have helped a great deal... I am definitely helping my students increase their ability to comprehend, infer, and use critical thinking skills." The answers raise questions in light of the high percentage of teachers who claim in another part of the survey that they have looked at student work. To them, looking at student work is not "pinpointing evidence."



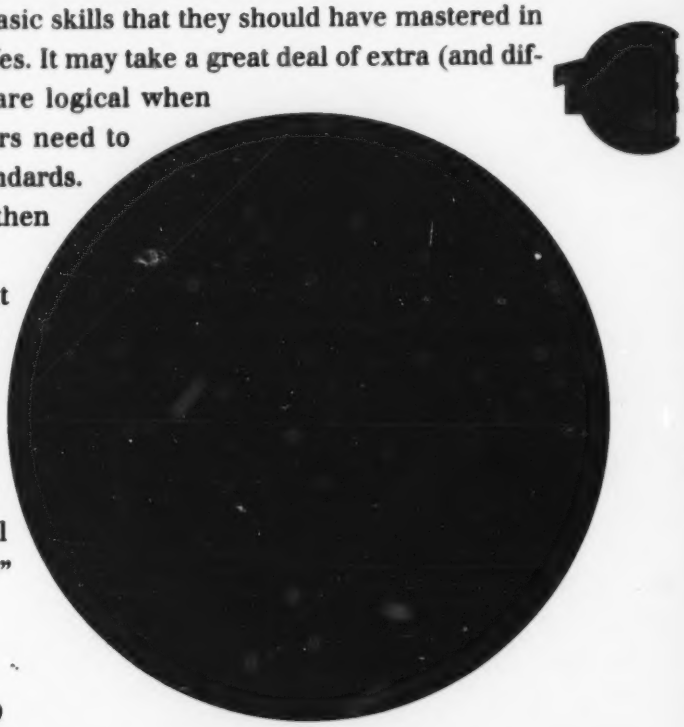
A Noe teacher said, "I see students improving, but I cannot pinpoint evidence." A first-year physical education teacher, assigned to teach science out of field, replied, "I have one class of low-achieving science students. They do not know what standards are; of 22 students in the class, only four can read."

**6. All of the students I teach can reach the new middle-school standards my district has established.**

| | Agree | Somewhat agree | Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|
| East Lake | 00 | 33 | 67 |
| Franklin | 14 | 25 | 61 |
| Noe | 10 | 23 | 66 |
| Pershing | 14 | 23 | 62 |
| South Park | 09 | 36 | 55 |
| Stephens | 17 | 22 | 61 |

At East Lake, not a single teacher agreed with this statement wholeheartedly. Teachers at Noe seemed to capture the diversity of opinion regarding this statement. One wrote, "No. There will always be students in regular education who will not meet standards because they don't have many basic skills that they should have mastered in elementary school." Another responded, "Yes. It may take a great deal of extra (and different) teaching, though." The answers are logical when responses to other items indicate teachers need to know more in order to teach to higher standards. If a teacher is unsure of his or her skills, then that belief is passed on to students.

A teacher at Franklin observed that "some students need one-on-one attention; some need remedial help; some need different teaching strategies (that most teachers don't use). To say that every student can reach standards would be to say that we need to provide an IEP [individual education plan] for every student. Can we?"



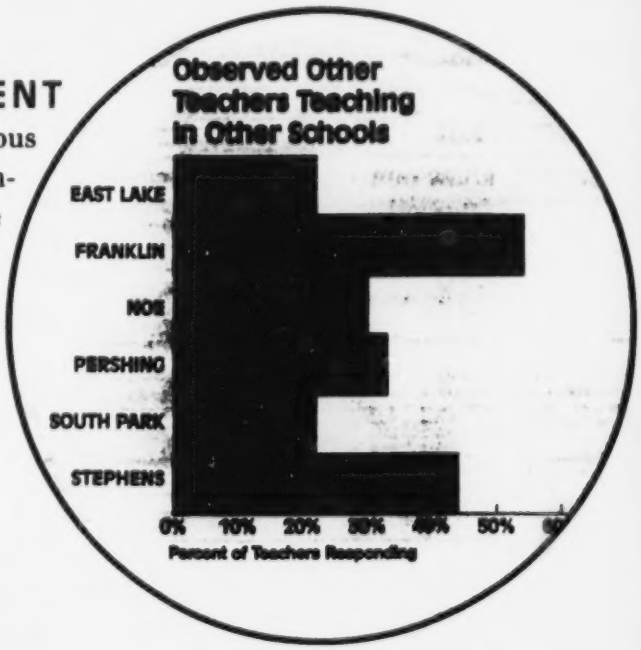
**7. Standards-based reform will have more meaning when performance standards are fully in place in my district.**

| | Agree | Somewhat agree | Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|
| East Lake | 56 | 44 | 00 |
| Franklin | 60 | 24 | 16 |
| Noe | 40 | 47 | 13 |
| Pershing | 50 | 25 | 25 |
| South Park | 52 | 24 | 24 |
| Stephens | 42 | 33 | 25 |

Said a Franklin teacher, "Minneapolis standards are too vague and not grade level specific enough. They are too global to explain clearly to concrete-thinking seventh or eighth graders."

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Each of the six Clark districts has used various strategies to train teachers to implement standards. To get a glimpse of how broadly those strategies have reached classroom teachers, the survey asked teachers to indicate the types of staff development they had experienced in the past three years.

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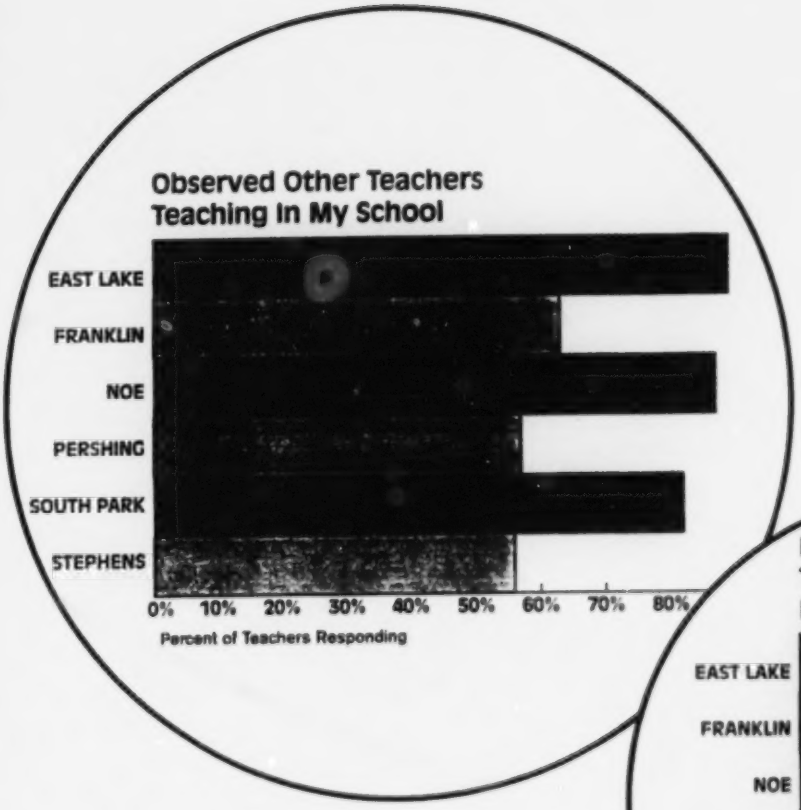


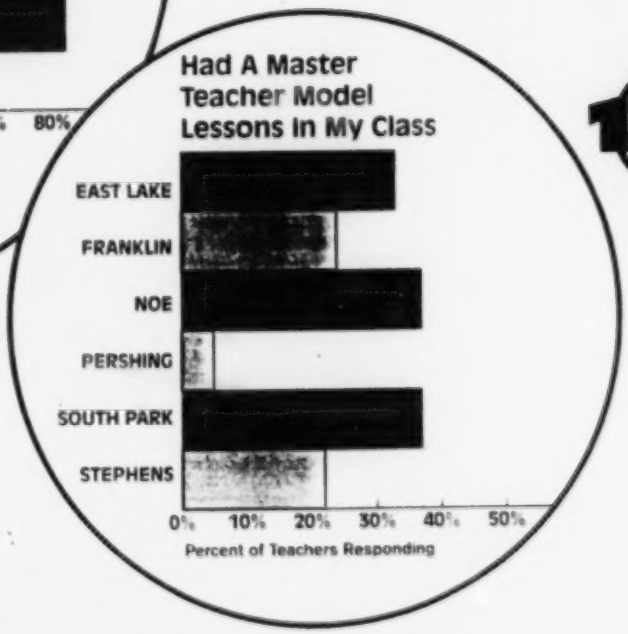


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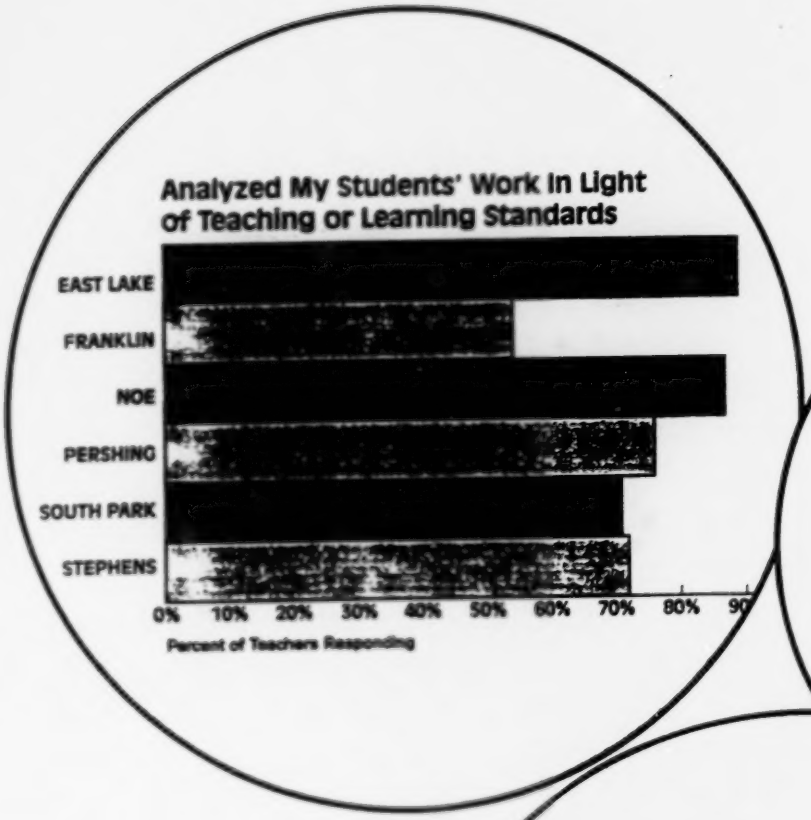


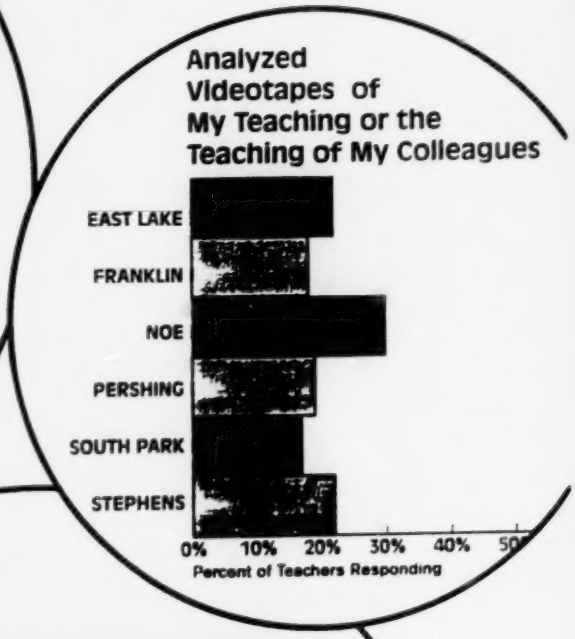


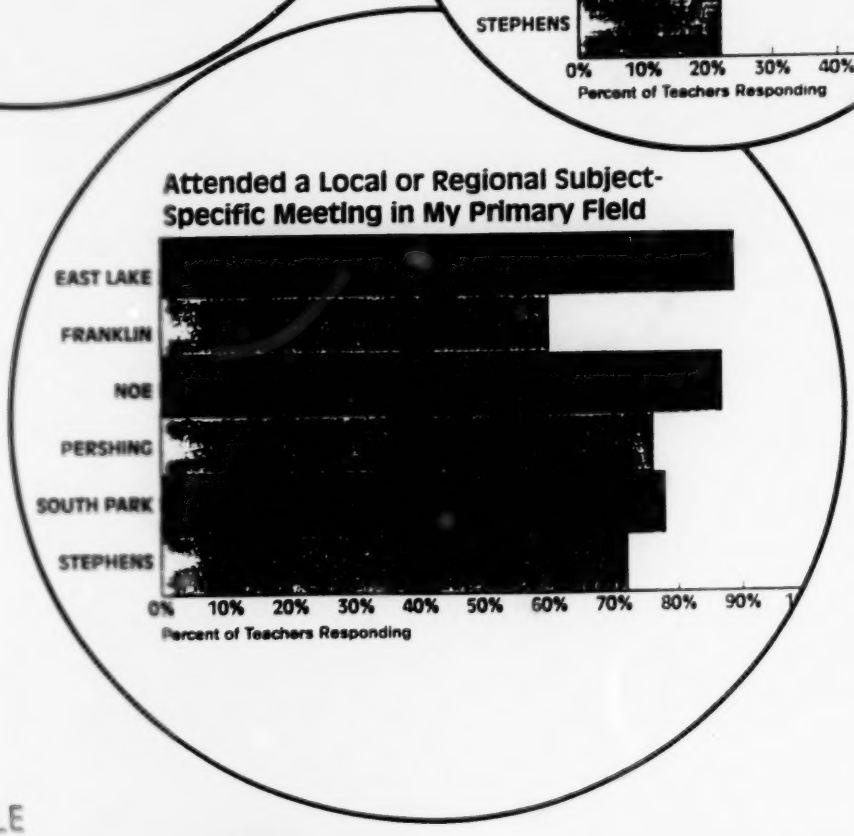


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In three of the schools, more than 80 percent of the teachers who responded to the survey had observed colleagues within their own schools. Fewer had visited other schools to observe teachers, although more than half of Franklin teachers had done so.

Using master teachers to model lessons is less common, but more than 30 percent of teachers in three schools had received this type of training. At Pershing, only 5 percent had received in-classroom training from master teachers, but 33 percent of those who responded to the survey had conducted model lessons in other teachers' classes.

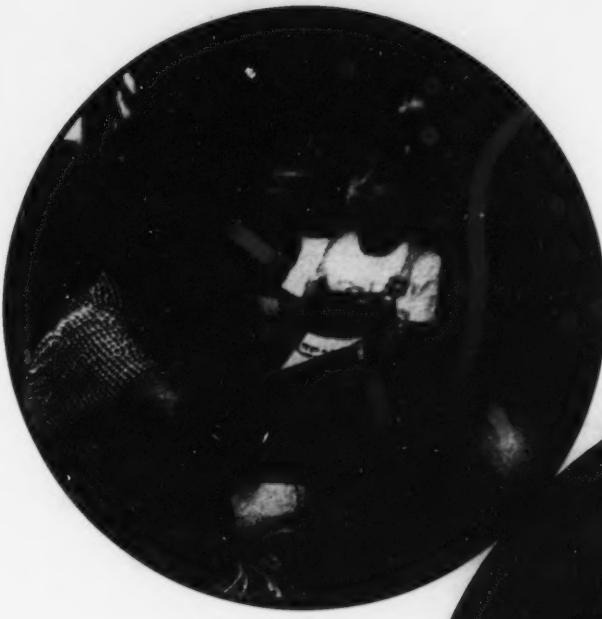
High percentages of teachers in most schools had analyzed their students' work as part of their professional development. Even so, relatively few had analyzed their own teaching or that of their colleagues using classroom videotapes. Many teachers had attended local or regional meetings in their own fields.

Two questions on the survey asked teachers to evaluate the ability of their peers to accomplish the goals of standards-based reform. Many thought that others in their departments knew too little about their subject matter or effective teaching strategies, although several acknowledged that such judgments are difficult to make when teachers rarely have the opportunity to work together. Even so, some were optimistic: "I use and have tried every method imaginable: groupwork, hands-on, labs, visual, auditory, kinesthetic, learning styles, reciprocal teaching, etc. I see other teachers doing the same."

Honest frustration with the difficulties of working with low-performing students tended to characterize better prepared teachers: "All of us are struggling with students who have low reading levels and are from homes with little structure or support for learning," said one long-time teacher. According to one teacher who called for more standards-based lessons in subject areas, "The administration thinks we know what we are doing. We all need more training from experts."

A new science teacher at Pershing with a major in biology wrote a full agenda: "I want to work with other teachers on curriculum building (creating and sharing lessons) and on comparative studies. I want us to analyze student work and understand what students know and are capable of doing. I would like a master teacher to teach my classes." Incidentally, she also believes all her students can learn at rigorous levels.

Asked what type of training activities would help them most in their own growth as professionals, many teachers provided thoughtful and compelling answers. At Stephens, for example, teachers asked for more help on working in teams, training in reading and writing across the curriculum, and "professional development that lasts over time."



New teachers at Pershing wanted to observe standards-based lessons in other classrooms and talk to other teachers in their fields about instructional strategies; one specified that she preferred to work along with an experienced teacher: "I don't just want to watch, I want to be active in helping another teacher in the classroom."

A very experienced teacher needed help motivating low-achieving students, while ano better prepared resource teachers to work with regular classrooms. One teacher mentioned the ingly diverse student population: "With 19 nati is important if you are focused on learning a Franklin wanted help in breaking their isolatio bers of my department as well as meet with found success," wrote a well-prepared and exp

, I
other

eeded help in
while another wanted
o work with special needs students now assigned to
entioned the challenges of working with an increas-
With 19 nationalities in the school, multiculturalism
learning and not just teaching." Some teachers at
heir isolation. "I need more time to plan with mem-
meet with teachers from other schools who have
red and experienced teacher.

## DISTRICT POLICIES

To conclude, the survey asked teachers to reflect on how recent changes in state or district policies have affected their schools and classrooms and to make suggestions for improvement.

A teacher at Stephens wanted greater cohesion in testing policies. The tests, said the teacher, "must measure a student's attainment of those standards.... If we teach one thing and test another, how fair are we being to the students or public?" The grading system, said another, should reflect standards if "standards-based reform is to really have teeth." Such reforms require "equity among teachers, classes, and schools within the district," observed another Stephens teacher.

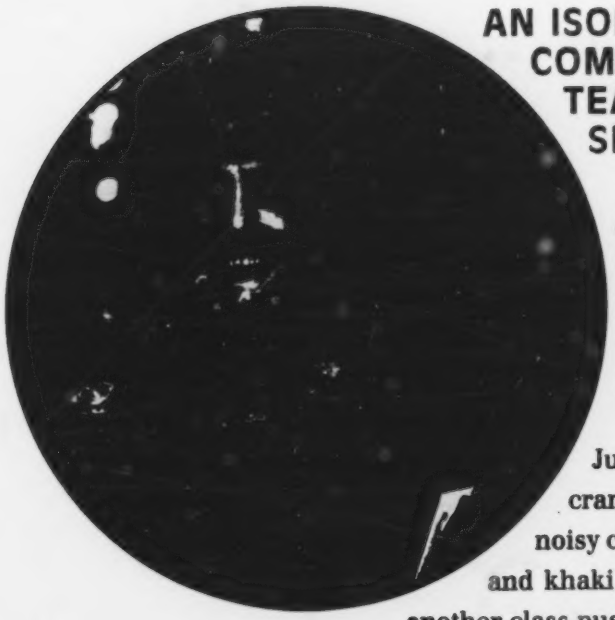
Some teachers at Pershing questioned where the reforms are headed. "There is far too much time being spent on the end product," said one. "No attention is being given to good teaching methods. Students are expected to produce work that is way above their level of development." This teacher clearly believes that students are capable of good work if teachers can learn how to teach and assess their students.

Others called for refinement of the standards and better alignment. One said the reforms would take awhile to have an effect. "We need examples of good standards-based lessons complete with rubrics... My department cannot agree on what standards mean in practice, so how can the rest of the district?"

The frequency with which districts change policy was another area of concern. "The district needs to stop changing everything," said a teacher at Noe. Complained a South Park teacher, "The district changes the standards and does not let us know until late August right before school starts. That is extremely frustrating." A math teacher who instructs more than 130 student a day felt "inserviced to death. My priorities should be to assess students where they are and then move them forward. I know where I need to go [with them]. Give me more time to get there."

At East Lake, teachers expressed frustration with students who enter their school performing below grade level. They wanted success stories from other inner-city schools, continuous professional development, and more explicit student assessments. But one teacher did not shy away from holding students to higher standards: "In a school such as East Lake where students come in two years below grade level,... gaps must be filled in order to prevent less-than-standard work with inflated scores because 'the poor little things' did the best they could. The standards cannot be ambiguous."

# STANDARDS CASE STUDY



## AN ISOLATED BUT COMMITTED TEACHER WHO SEES SOME HOPE

**JUDY LYONS**
**Sixth-grade**
**Language Arts Teacher**
**EAST LAKE MIDDLE SCHOOL**
**Chattanooga, Tennessee**

Judy Lyons stands in the middle of her cramped, cluttered classroom watching a noisy class of sixth graders, all in white shirts and khaki pants, disappear out the door, while another class pushes to get in. "There just isn't enough of me to go around," she decides, after a half-day of teaching reading that already has left her exasperated. This is not the frustrated comment of a beginning teacher, but an honest appraisal by a very experienced, dedicated professional trying to make sense of a situation that works against all she is trying to do for her students.

There are two sixth-grade teachers absent this day and no substitutes, so Lyons's classes are larger than usual and out of sync on the school's block scheduling. She sighs about the assignments turned in by students to write sentences on what they want to be. Some sentences are not complete, but even more revealing are the misspelled answers. She picks up the list of absentees sent around by the office: "I haven't seen this kid since Christmas [it is now February]. These two boys were in a fight I broke up this morning before school. All of the rest were tardy, but not absent."

Her school, East Lake Middle in Chattanooga, looks like it gave up pretending to be an appealing place a long time ago. It actually moved to a temporary location at the end of the 1997–98 school year, an equally dismal elementary school on the next block, while waiting for a new facility. At East Lake for eight years, this very Southern, polite, soft-spoken, and demanding teacher chooses to be at the school despite problems that constantly challenge her to ask, "Am I doing it right?" It is possible to be a mediocre teacher

in another type of school "and get along and have your kids do well," she says, "but you have to be able to teach in a school like this."

A peaceful park with a large fountain and pool faces the school, but the neighborhood around is anything but peaceful. With the highest crime rate in the city, it is laced with gangs, white and black, although gang activity has been kept out of the school. Not the effects of it, however. A student's death in a gang fight several years ago happened on the eve of state testing, throwing the school, and its scores, into turmoil. More troublesome for Lyons is that her students, primarily black and more than 90 percent eligible for free lunch programs, have a broad range of reading skills (from second- through eleventh-grade levels); fewer than 20 percent can handle sixth-grade material. Lyons is well aware of the many supports her students need, especially from their parents, but she rarely slips into looking for excuses. She is there to give them all she can, to catch them up and to get them ready for seventh grade.

Over many years of teaching, 18 of them in Chattanooga, Lyons has studied and tried everything that might engage her students. She enrolled in the district's training for Writing and Reading Workshops, found it appealing but couldn't make the methods work with her students. "If you have kids with no skills, you can't tell them to choose any topic, write whatever you want, and if you don't use good grammar, that's all right because your peers will help you revise. There are no peers who can do that," she says.

After this experience, Lyons, who had turned down an offer to be language arts supervisor for the city school system because her experience had been exclusively in the sixth grade or lower, sat down with the supervisor who scheduled the workshops. She remembers saying, long before standards-based reform came to Chattanooga, that the system needed a better plan "for exactly what kids need to know when they leave the fifth grade, such as being able to write certain types of paragraphs." But, says Lyons, "they were afraid to come up with something like that because it would be too limiting on teachers."

Lyons enrolled in the training for another district initiative, Socratic Seminars, and tried to help other East Lake teachers use this strategy to help students comprehend at higher levels what they are studying. But the teachers wouldn't do the preparation, so the idea fizzled. She was coordinator of the Language Arts Vertical Team, a program of the College Board to relate curriculum and assessment from one school level to another, but it folded when the city and county school systems merged. She tried to introduce

standards in writing assignments on a team basis, feeling that it would be better for students if all teachers at East Lake used the same criteria, but "they got tired of hearing me." She is no longer a team leader. She is department chair, though, and tries to model new assessment strategies and bring curriculum resources to other language arts teachers.

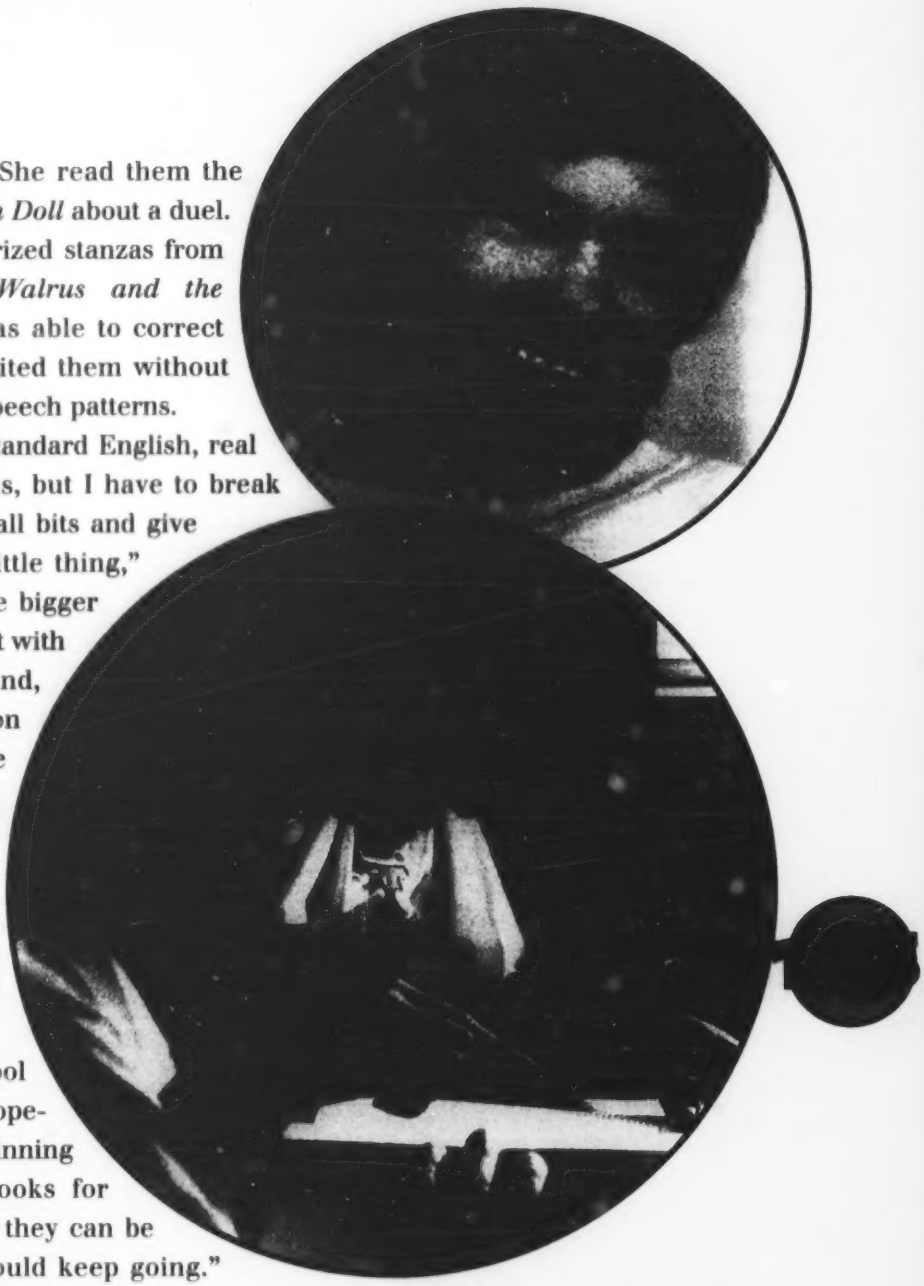
Lyons realizes she has no authority with her colleagues. She held workshops for her department on "writing prompts," a method endorsed through the district's standards, then realized she was the only teacher using them. "Administrators talk a good game, but they don't understand the specifics of each subject-matter discipline," and consequently, she says, can't monitor teaching well. She realizes that principals get moved around so much they have difficulty learning new skills themselves. Her principal during most of the period covered by these interviews set out demands for regular teacher discussions of lessons, alignment of assignments to the new standards, and other efforts to get more structure. He liked the idea of teachers assessing student work together, but his own style of leadership did not model collaboration. His view of assessing student work unsettled Lyons. "He wants everything to be graded, no matter what the objective for the writing is. If I did that, every paper I handed back would look like it had blood all over it."

East Lake's environment, confusion over standards, lack of cohesion among the staff, and history of unfocused professional development characterizes many, if not most, urban middle schools. The environment wastes much of the professionalism and energy that teachers like Lyons have to give. She keeps doing the best she knows how. She has taken all the training available for the Accelerated Reader. Having used performance assessments in her own classroom, she volunteered to help write them during the summer of 1998 but was rejected because she had not served on the content standards committee.

Although Lyons wants her students to experience good literature and learn to love using language to express themselves, she feels her options are limited. The Accelerated Reader program takes up much of the class reading time, but she still gets in at least three novels a year. Students' journals count for a large part of their grades, and she uses every opportunity to encourage them to listen closely to and elaborate on language. A list of "Fight'n Words" on her bulletin board grew from an assignment to write letters about a "disagreement." The students didn't know the word and many others with the same meaning, so she and the students began to brainstorm, coming up

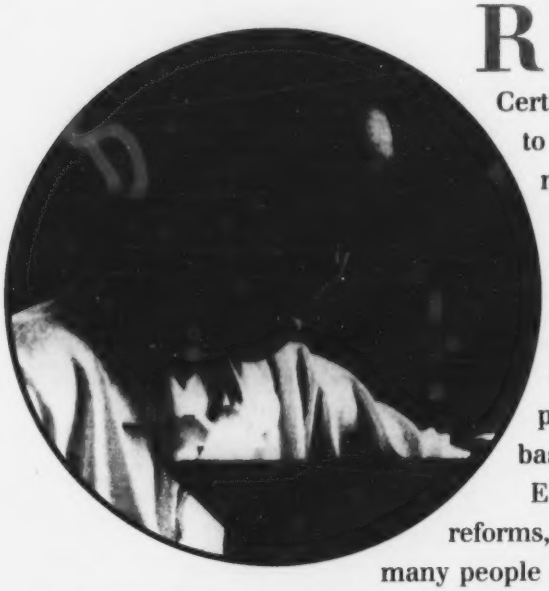
with spat, quarrel, row. She read them the story *Calico Cat, Gingham Doll* about a duel. The students also memorized stanzas from poems such as *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, and Lyons was able to correct their English as they recited them without directly criticizing their speech patterns.

"I want them to use standard English, real sentences and paragraphs, but I have to break everything down into small bits and give them a rubric for each little thing," she says. Their minds are bigger than that, she believes, but with no other resources at hand, she now depends heavily on direct instruction and the discrete skills work found in the Science Research Associates (SRA) commercial resources, which are "consistent and help them with what they need to know."



At the end of the school year, she is much more hopeful. Her students are beginning to select higher-level books for reading "and finding out they can be successful. I wish we could keep going." Lyons could retire, but plans to stay on for one more year of teaching. With a new principal, East Lake began in the 1998–99 school year to transform into a Socratic Seminar school, a change Lyons is not sure current students or teachers are prepared to make. But, "I can't quit now," she says. "I haven't figured it all out."

# WHAT HOLDS BACK STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS?



Certain components enable standards-based reforms to work, for students and teachers. If standards are not articulated in ways that make them accessible to students, teachers, and parents; if teachers do not have opportunities for targeted, high-quality professional development; if performance standards based on higher content are not integrated into classroom planning and routines; and if principals do not know how to lead a standards-based school, the reforms will not reach students.

East Lake's experience with standards-based reforms, for example, may not have all of these pieces. Yet, many people in the school and at the district continue to try. When other issues take precedence—such as the personal and policy matters that needed attention in Chattanooga to pull off the merger—changes in classrooms are very difficult to implement. The county and the city, for example, had different attitudes about how much authority to grant principals, and that problem alone slowed the new district's ability to put the pieces together for standards-based reforms. Still, the merged system benefited from the experience of Chattanooga's principals and teachers with the Clark project.

Just as the six school districts are at different places on a continuum leading toward standards-based reforms, so are they experiencing different barriers, in both substance and degree. Some problems have their roots in the particular circumstances of a district or its schools, while some are predictable and probably manageable outgrowths of this type of fundamental change. Yet others—perhaps the most intractable—are inseparable from the broader condition of American public education. These pose the greatest threat to a district's ability to be completely successful in realizing standards-based reform and in all likelihood will be the most difficult to overcome. They include the following issues.

## INADEQUATE ATTENTION TO INTEGRATION AND CONTINUITY

"We don't have any road maps. We're designing this as we go," observes Rosaena Garza, director of academics in Corpus Christi. No one in the six districts would be likely to argue with her statement, but the planners in the six Clark districts enjoy a luxury not available to most teachers: time to reflect, discuss ideas, and meet together to create the designs. Their plans look very good on paper. But the designs seldom calculate the effects of teachers' limited time, capacities, and willingness to work on the changes being proposed.

Over several years, Louisville teachers watched as the state and district handed down one standards report, guideline, or emphasis after another. Teachers were told to pay attention to national standards, state standards, the state core content document, district middle-school standards, district scope and sequence guidelines, district performance assessment templates, and, finally, district performance standards. As enthusiastic as Janet Seibert, a teacher at Noe Middle School, is about standards, she questions the need for so many directives and says her colleagues, "are confused about all this stuff." True, each new resource had a purpose. But to teachers, these documents seemed to be conceived on the run.

In San Diego, teachers invested their time in learning about the assessment system, New Standards. When the district needed schools to pilot the TerraNova examinations, which had been selected as the district's student achievement measure, teachers at Pershing Middle School were among those who volunteered. California's decision to mandate another nationally standardized test threw all their efforts away. In Tennessee, teachers and district officials focused on aligning standards and curriculum to the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP); then the state adopted TerraNova, which is thought to emphasize critical thinking skills more than TCAP. In Texas, new content standards adopted by the state will necessitate changes in the state's TAAS assessment and, consequently, in Corpus Christi's content standards.

Districts have little influence over state accountability policies and therefore cannot shield teachers from the vagaries of test changes. With foresight and leadership, however, they can help teachers look beyond the tests and build instruction around content and performance standards. Given the virtual inevitability of changes at the state level, such efforts to develop continuity by district and school administrators are crucial.

Many educators acknowledge that content standards mean little to teachers without performance standards and assessments. Teachers need to have their own hands-on, concrete learning experiences around standards that give them specific help on translating standards into instruction.

This is not to say that accountability is unimportant. In Minneapolis, for example, the current teachers' contract supports content standards. However, Chris Argylis, an organizational change scholar who draws a strong distinction between an "understanding" and an "action," would consider the contract weak on action with no real requirements to be accountable for standards-based teaching.

The lack of an integrated approach may explain why standards got off to a slow start at the classroom level in Minneapolis. If the four teachers at Franklin Middle School followed for this report are typical, content standards alone were not enough to transform their instructional habits. This team of core subject teachers used very traditional teaching methods and, overall, had low expectations for their mostly minority, low-income students. For two years, they sincerely believed they already were teaching to high standards, although few had studied the standards notebook distributed to all teachers. The team leader, a popular and experienced teacher, had read the national geography standards but rejected them for her classroom. "They're good for me to know," she said, "but boring for kids." The language arts teacher had looked at the performance packages prepared by the state for different state content standards but decided "mine are better. When the curriculum is your own work, you think more of it. We might as well go back to the old SRA if we are going to do all this prescribed stuff."

Continuity was even more sorely needed in 1997 after student performance on Minnesota's standardized tests became a matter of public controversy: only 5 of the 22 middle schools had more than 50 percent of students achieving passing scores, and approximately 90 percent of black students in the city failed the exam the first time. While a task force of educators was drawing up a template for gradual reform, many parents and advocacy groups in Minneapolis were demanding immediate change—a demand that threatened to turn schools toward an almost exclusive focus on remedial action to pull up the test scores. Paul Goren, former assistant superintendent for policy and now a program officer with the MacArthur Foundation, recognized that the district should not resort to quick fixes, predicting that "fixating just on the test will kill standards-based reforms." Yet, at least at Franklin, teachers responded to the low test scores

primarily with testing drills and efforts to motivate students to do better on the tests.

Minneapolis district leaders may be committed to standards-based reforms, but there is a lot of static as that message moves down into classrooms. A 1998 survey of teachers analyzed by Art Indelicato, a former principal and district middle-grades coordinator, found that almost 60 percent of teachers said they were "always" teaching to the standards. Yet, less than 20 percent said they were always referring to performance standards when teaching, indicating a certain fuzziness in their understanding. For some reason, many teachers in Minneapolis are failing to "get it" when it comes to making significant changes in their instruction.

## LACK OF SKILL IN TEACHING LOW-PERFORMING STUDENTS

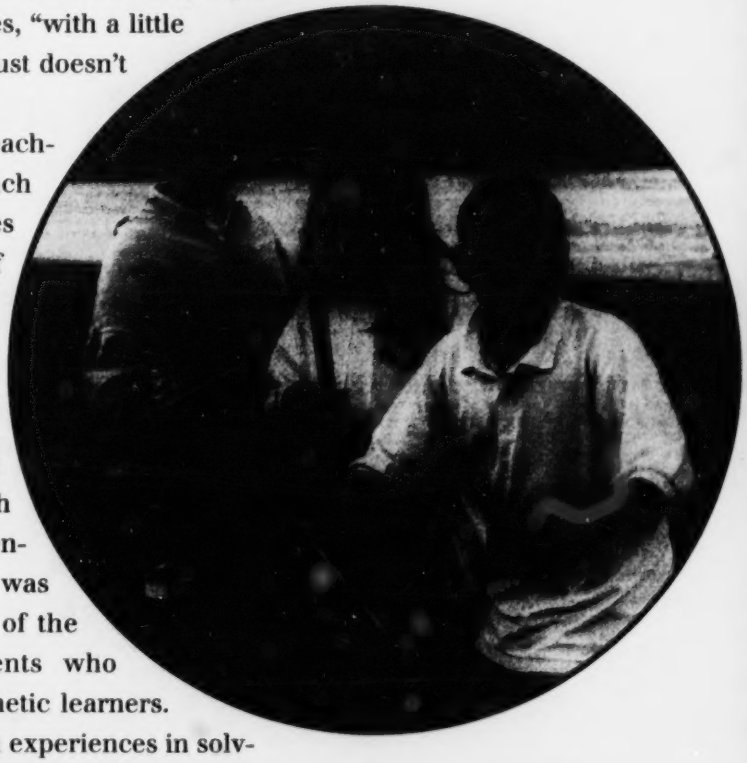
Most teachers are totally confounded by the lack of performance by students at the academic bottom. Yet what comes through in interviews all over the country is a commonly held belief that these students are capable of learning at much higher levels. Sometimes their lack of communication skills masks their intelligence and savvy. Often, students' lack of effort frustrates teachers more than anything else. Students don't turn in homework, don't participate in class, leave classroom assignments incomplete. They chew gum, even though it means lunch-time detentions. Their pants droop too far, even though that is against the dress code. The students who display these behaviors and the teachers who complain about them are playing a game that everyone loses.

Experienced teachers may resent the suggestion that they need to do more to reach low-performing students. Their strategies fit comfortably for some students—and in inner-city schools, "some" success is what sustains teachers. Tom Carnes, history department chair at Pershing Middle School in San Diego, spent a quarter of a century at the inner-city Mann Middle School, then moved to Pershing in the affluent hills above the city to be a teacher leader. His teaching style—innovative and rigorous—goes over well with the neighborhood students.

Still, his "regular" classes consist predominantly of students from the barrios downtown, and he must show progress with these students as well under the district's standards. As Pershing's principal moved the faculty toward standards-based teaching and accountability for all students, Carnes became frustrated. He felt successful with his advanced classes, but not with his other classes. "My attempt to motivate students with

third-grade reading levels is discouraging when I have to step on them so much," he says. He was criticized for flunking so many, wondered "how many phone calls can I make to parents," and felt undermined by policies out of his control. "You can threaten these kids with summer school, but they find out it is a piece of cake," he says.

Carnes worked on district standards committees, took training on new programs, and attempted to develop performance standards in his department. But he admits, in a bitter mixture of anger and anguish, that "I'm not doing a good job" with these students. Yet, he believes, "with a little bit of help, they can do the work." He just doesn't know what kind of help.

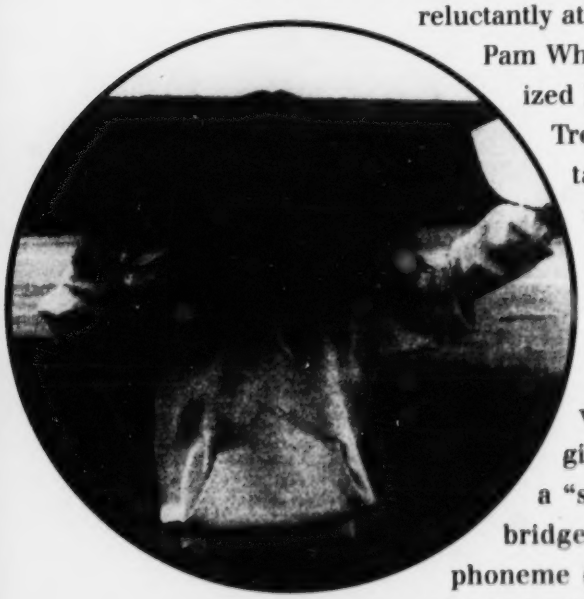


One wants him to know that some teachers in some places know how to reach these students. Research-based strategies are available for teachers. And some of the answers are rather simple. One of the most revealing pieces of information to come out of the Clark districts is from a learning styles inventory given to students who failed to pass eighth grade and were sent to the Long Beach Prep Academy. The validity of such inventories may be limited, but the evidence was overwhelming. More than 90 percent of the mostly male, mostly minority students who wound up at the academy were kinesthetic learners. They needed applied learning, hands-on experiences in solving real problems and creating projects, in heavy doses. Yet if they had been in remedial or low-level classes in their middle schools, they sat for months, perhaps years, in classrooms that offered just the opposite: drill and kill, as the saying goes.

Without even knowing about this finding, Janet Seibert at Noe Middle School in Louisville proved the point when she took some of the students from her eighth-grade team on a "math walk" around the school area. The students were mostly low-performing and unable to afford an end-of-the-year trip to Chicago. They named all the angles

of buildings and answered all the questions about the angles on a math quiz. "It was thrilling," Seibert recounts, "because the students were excited about learning out on the street and being able to get the answers right." Teachers, she says emphatically, "need to get out of their seats and do things with these students."

In Long Beach, mandatory "institutes" for middle-grades teachers use research-based strategies to show teachers how to make the texts—including textbooks, nonfiction resources, and documents—accessible to poor readers. At one session, the 20 or so teachers in the all-day class reported on how they had used learning maps, a strategy presented in the previous session, in their classrooms. "We compared two sports on skills, their similarities and differences," reported a physical education teacher. A social studies teacher told of using the same type map to help her students compare the United States and Japan in the 1990s. A math teacher used a flow map; others used trees, bubbles, circles, or bridges, all ways of helping students organize information.



All teachers at Stephens Middle School took the training on learning maps, some reluctantly at first, according to sixth-grade science/math teacher Pam Whisner, but they became enthusiastic when they realized how much the maps helped their students. As Mike Troyer walked around his school while students were taking the district's performance assessments, he observed that "for every one doing an outline, nine were using a learning map. They may not have been doing it perfectly, but they had the framework."

Also at the institute, teachers learned special techniques to help students with vocabulary and visualizing text. Literature circles, they were told, give poor readers a chance to practice oral language in a "safe environment." Retelling a story can provide a bridge to the text. The teachers learned that without phoneme (sounds) awareness—a problem for as many as 20 percent of their classes—students can only read words in their visual memory, not those they hear. Both phoneme awareness and phonics are necessary, but a program that allows no play with language—through poetry, for example—may prevent students from developing phoneme awareness.

Teachers for all subject areas attend at least four such sessions, always providing feedback from their homework—trying out the ideas with their own students. Middle-school students may be at an early *reading* stage, Cecelia Osborn, the district's literacy curriculum leader for grades K-5, insists, "but they are beyond being early *thinkers*. They can be quite sophisticated." The institutes' purpose is to help teachers mine their students' thinking through sophisticated literacy strategies.

## FALLING BACK ON TRACKING

In the middle schools visited for this report, "ability grouping" is a misleading term because ability often has little to do with the sorting of students. The major issue is one of access to quality teaching. Most of us think of tracking in public schools as an organizational phenomenon, but the truth is that sorting takes place because of attitudes. Teachers and parents play invidious games with low-performing students, "working the system" so that some students (and teachers and families) always are on top. Part of the problem is that parents and administrators realize there are too few superior teachers to go around, so the rationing has to take place.

By the bad luck of a teacher's failure to pick a student out of the crowd, or even by getting one poor grade, many Stephens Middle School sixth graders sit in rows, bored, in a bungalow on the playground. Their math and science teacher does one problem after another on the overhead projector, sometimes using insulting examples to interest his students, then passes out worksheets for the rest of the class period. Most students finish in a few minutes and have nothing else to do. They haven't done much in the past either, judging by the work around the room. About the only hands-on activity on the bulletin board is a science project—different-shaped clouds made with cotton glued to sky-blue paper sheets, an interesting project perhaps for students two or three grades behind this one.

Only a few yards away, in Pam Whisner's sixth-grade bungalow classroom, sophisticated student work and projects fill the walls. Students are working in groups, using manipulatives and calculators. These students are in an advanced (though not gifted and talented) class, and by the good luck of a teacher noticing them or better grades than usual, they are in this room and not the one nearby.

Principal Mike Troyer knows students are getting cheated in the classroom with worksheets, little hands-on learning, and low-level, endless problems covering the

same material. But, he says, math teachers are scarce in Long Beach, especially in a school such as his with a large number of language diverse and poor students. Turnover is high, and he is supervising both new teachers and 15 teachers due for evaluations, a process that requires a minimum of four visits each with follow-up discussions and walk-in observations. The unimaginative math/science teacher is not due for evaluation this year.

Such inequities do not go unnoticed among Stephens teachers, but they have little control over a complex situation. At a faculty meeting when the former principal, Mike Bowles, launched discussions about standards, they shared their frustrations. "The standards should force us to move toward heterogeneous grouping," said an eighth-grade language arts teacher. "But we are stuck with a cynical process. Parents in other schools go out of the district to have their kids tested for gifted and talented classes, but so many of our parents don't know how to do this." In small group discussions they came up with more comments about tracking, noting, for example, that algebra is watered down for many students. They recommended that the school be more flexible about grade levels, giving students more time to become proficient at standards. They wanted to get away from standardized tests and competition among students. "Norms make comparisons between students," one group reported out, "but standards measure individual proficiency."

In Troyer's opinion, the advanced students from across the district who opt to attend Stephens—about 200 out of a student body of 1,200—actually only replace the neighborhood students attracted away from Stephens by other magnet programs. "If we could keep our neighborhood achievers, they would be better models than those we import," he says.

In Louisville, buses move helter-skelter across the district, taking students to magnet programs, schools with honors programs, schools with special programs, all as part of the district's managed choice program. As the Focused Writing Project has documented in both Louisville and Long Beach, the chase is all about experienced teachers, safe places, and status.

Teachers probably don't realize how much the aura of tracking pervades their attitudes toward lower-performing students. It's the little slights observed in the districts that add up:

- Teachers who have both regular or remedial classes and classes of advanced students tend to give much clearer, more strongly reinforced directions and explanations to their advanced students, as if it were much more important for them to understand the instructions.

- Teachers play an invidious calculator game. With more advanced students, multiplication tables are in every student's notebook and calculators are handed out freely. "I don't have time to go back over the basics with them," a teacher explains. In regular or remedial classes, students don't get to use calculators because "they need to learn the basics first."

- Teachers withhold engaging, interesting information from regular or remedial students, as if they were doling out punishment. One tells of letting her advanced students develop rubrics for a lesson, but says her regular students "couldn't do that." Another explains that her gifted science students will get to study the phyla, but with regular students she only needs to make sure they understand that living organisms are interdependent. Yet another teacher allows advanced students to dress up like the famous figure they are profiling and videotape their presentations; regular students, however, "can't be trusted to control themselves."

Some research findings related to the Clark project are even more disillusioning. For example, the teacher survey in the focus schools revealed that teachers assigned out of their fields have lower expectations for their students. In several of the schools, as many as 40 percent of teachers had at least one course out of their subject-area background,

meaning that a great number of students are being taught by teachers who may not believe they can meet standards. Also, case studies done by teachers in Minneapolis point to discrepancies in grading and testing, with black students receiving lower grade point averages even when their test scores are similar to those of white students. Such patterns have been documented in national research studies.

> *Based on our research, we know that parents of high-achieving students and university educators and administrators need to become part of the solution to the problem of the under-education of students in our lowest level classes and lowest status schools. Until all groups reconceptualize the issue, not as a zero-sum game in which one student's gain is another student's loss, but as an issue of helping more students achieve all that educators are capable of teaching, there will be little movement to dismantle the current hierarchical, competitive structure in which only a handful of students are held to a high standard. Until then, world-class standards will remain beyond the reach of all but the chosen few who were placed at birth on the top tier of our stratified social structure."*
>
> —Jeannie Oakes and Amy Stuart Wells
>
> *Beyond the Technicalities of School Reform*, UCLA Press, 1996

Standards-based reforms in the Clark districts promise opportunities for all middle-school students to be successful now, and in the future. Teachers who don't believe all students deserve the best and withhold rich learning from certain groups of students probably do so without realizing the consequences of their actions. There are alternatives for students who don't succeed in the middle schools, they say. Or they can get a General Education Development (GED) diploma. Or they will make it up when they mature a little bit.

These futures simply do not work for students. Consider some facts:

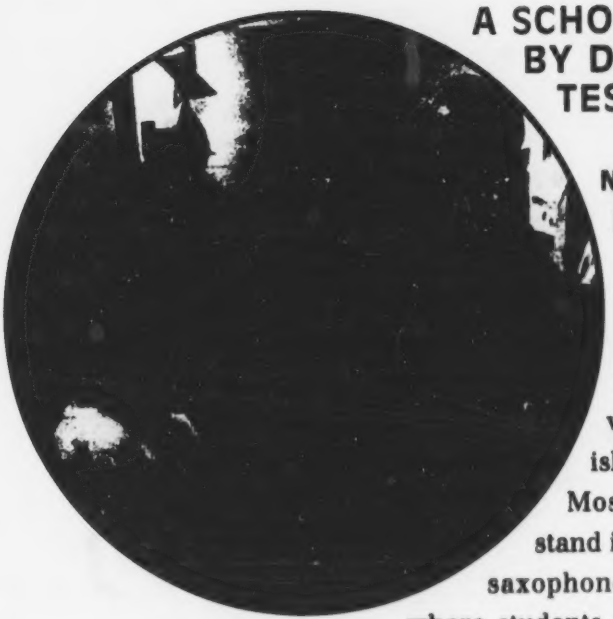
- The National Educational Longitudinal Study 1988 (NELS-88) has made several follow-up studies of the cohort of eighth graders studied in 1988. The research shows that students who decide by the seventh grade that they will attend college are less likely

to make unwise choices (regarding, for example, drugs or pregnancies) and much more likely to enter high school ready for college preparatory work. It is in the middle grades that students put together a vision of themselves.

- Students usually don't catch up later, and the alternatives are disastrous in today's economy. For example, a recent study of the GED program found that although such a path was better than dropping out of the education system completely, the GED did not have many advantages, either. It does not get a young person into the military. It might allow him or her to enroll in college, but GED holders do not complete their degrees at the same rate as high-school graduates. As for dropping out and finding a job, teachers should not wish that course upon their students. In this highly technological economy, today's dropouts are making less than their grandparents who left school before graduating.

It is in the middle grades when young people form their future. When all middle-school teachers and schools accept responsibility to help shape those futures, students will enter high school ready for a rigorous academic program. Standards-based reforms are a promising way to make that possible, but those reforms must apply to all students and all schools, not just some.

# STANDARDS CASE STUDY



## A SCHOOL MOTIVATED BY DISAPPOINTING TEST RESULTS

**NOE MIDDLE SCHOOL**
**Louisville, Kentucky**

From the outside, Noe Middle School looks like a fortress. Narrow window slits are the only architectural relief in its solid red brick walls. The feeling of austerity, however, vanishes immediately upon stepping into the lobby. Most likely, a student will have set up a music stand in a corner and be practicing with a clarinet or saxophone. The noise doesn't bother the office staff, where students are totally comfortable chattering with adults about their weekend plans or school projects. Wide spaces not really hallways lead past clumps of open classrooms; walls are used primarily to separate teams from one another. Only the science, art, and other special rooms around the perimeter of the building resemble regular classrooms.

It's not necessary to knock on a door and ask to come in and observe. Learning hangs out for all to see—students working in groups together at tables, clustered at a computer, or reading on the floor. Occasionally, where a more traditional teacher is in charge, students can be seen sitting in rows, in real contrast to their surroundings. Because grades are grouped together, there is a minimum of movement from one teacher to another and no bells during the day. Each of the school's 11 teams has a special education unit; physically disabled students, some severely so, wheel past the classes, often pushed by other children. The students are boisterous and active, like all middle graders, but in this school they instinctively keep the noise level down, most of the time.

When the principal, Ron Crutcher, worked in the central office in the Louisville system, "I could walk into a building and know immediately that it didn't feel right for kids. Noe lets you know right away that it is a good school because the kids are happy here. They are self-confident and very approachable." Certainly, it is the most diverse

school in the Jefferson County system. Of the more than 1,200 students, about a third are black; 55 percent are white; and most of the rest are language minority students, the highest number of any middle school in the state. Noe houses a gifted and talented magnet program and a choice program for the visual and performing arts alongside its regular classes for neighborhood students. Fifty-five percent of students are eligible for Title I services.

Crutcher actively recruits students for the school's special programs, but once inside Noe something happens for students that modifies what could be very separate opportunities for learning. It isn't perfect—no large school with as much diversity, especially in parent demands, can do everything it ought to for every student—but Noe tries harder than many middle schools. Only 9 percent of its students scored in the novice category in the statewide reading results released in the fall of 1997, and most of those were students with disabilities. There were no low novice scores in social studies. The 1998 results showed more students were moving to the top of the second performance level — apprentice. There may be a few students who cannot do better work, but most who are performing at low levels are capable, says Kathy Sayre, instructional vice principal at Noe. "No one in this school has given up on any kid."

Students move into performing arts classes or enrichment programs on the basis of interest and willingness to work. The long-time music director is totally professional and has high standards, says Crutcher. No one gets into his program because their music classes from elementary school automatically qualified them. Students sign up on the basis of interest; the school scours warehouses and other resources for musical instruments if students cannot afford to purchase them. Teachers move students into the gifted and talented classes depending on ability in individual subject areas, something other middle schools believe they are not allowed to do (apparently Noe doesn't ask).

A federally tagged Blue Ribbon School, Noe paid scant attention to the mandates of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) or the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) assessments when they first came along, deciding initially that it already was doing what the reforms sought. In the first round of KIRIS results, it was a reward school. Expected to improve by a certain percentage over the following two years, Noe failed to do so. Being classified as a school in decline totally shocked administrators and staff. At first, some passed the results off as unimportant, while others resented the process. One of Noe's strengths, however, is teamwork, and led by Crutcher

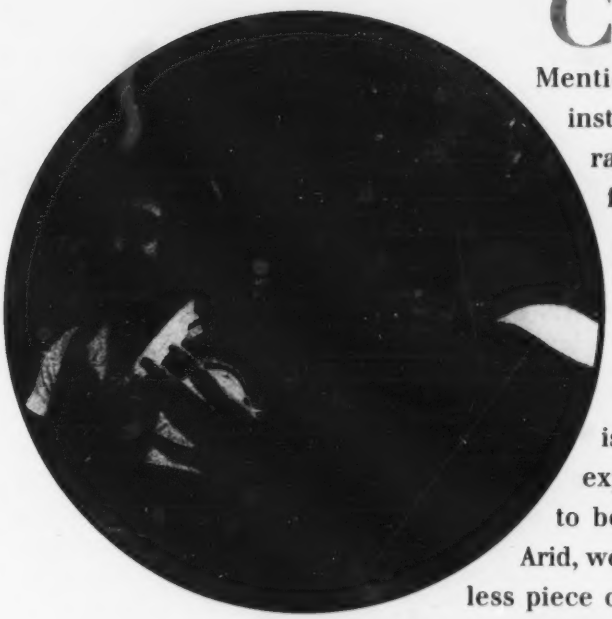
and Sayre, the school took the curve ball they received and made it work for them.

"The teachers were devastated, says Sayre, "but they didn't sulk. They asked, 'What can we do?'" One response was closer monitoring by the school's administrators. Departments had already been reviewing the curriculum, but Crutcher and Sayre began meeting with each team every month to check assignments and performance tasks. They asked for documentation on how each team was dealing with students doing unsatisfactory work. Members of the site-based decision making council participated in summer professional development on aligning the curriculum to standards. Some of the focus on alignment came from the Distinguished Educators assigned by the state to the school because of its decline status. The templates for looking at student work and organizing student writing, developed by the state and disseminated through the Distinguished Educators, helped both students and teachers become more structured, say the administrators. The greatest improvement came with the lowest-performing students, who benefited from more organized and clearly articulated assignments.

A planning committee at the school participated in drawing up a two-year consolidated plan, as required by the state, that covers instruction, assessment, and community involvement. Analyzing the data, the committee realized that the school still has a long way to go in order to reach the state's goal: all students at the proficiency level. At a faculty meeting, a group of teachers studying the data laid out the major problem without flinching—the school still needed to focus on the lack of achievement among many of its black students, mostly boys. Some suggested more walls in this open school, but Crutcher was quick to reply that walls were not the issue (poor performance among this group is endemic across the country, "in schools with lots of walls," he pointed out). The teachers then decided they needed to have heart-to-heart discussions with the students themselves and ask them for guidance. The staff also developed plans with specific timetables and responsibilities that might not have been treated as seriously before Noe was forced to account for student progress across the board. "The decline label helped us to accept accountability, and we were able to ask teachers to do some things that before would have been taken as an effort to crimp their style," says Sayre.

On the next KIRIS results, Noe was above expectations or improved in every area, but its teachers are determined to do even better.

# WHAT STANDARDS-BASED REFORMS NEED TO CONTINUE



Mention of urban middle schools prompts an instant image of places where most of us would rather not be. Unsettling, weary on the psyche, frustrating, with a scarcity of joy and a surplus of problems, often in bleak surroundings—these are the perceptions of schools full of some of the neediest youngsters in our country.

We miss so much by thinking this way. It is like picturing the American desert—the vast expanse that stretches almost from top border to bottom one—as a Great Basin of sameness. Arid, welcoming to only marginal life, a sort of hopeless piece of earth—this is what many think is desert country. Yet, traveling from one side of the Basin to the other, one doesn't just drop into a flat plain for hundreds of hot miles. Rather, the roads go up and down over a series of mountain ranges, a dozen in all, each one unique underneath a veneer of sandy soil and scrubby trees. The mountains teem with life, adapting to the wind and temperatures and the little bit of water the mountain ranges on the edges allow to get by. They have much in common, but scientists of all sorts cannot successfully fit a matrix over the ranges and basins that would organize the similarities. There are too many exceptions, too much difference among the mountains and valleys to use one explanation for what makes the desert full of hope.

The landscape of the schools portrayed in this book seems to have all the things that

we think of as difficult about urban schools—that perception of sameness that one sees when first visiting the desert. Yet each district, even each school is a particular place, and while what defines them as *typically urban* helps describe them, they have adjusted to their circumstances in remarkably different ways. They teem with ideas, astonishingly good teaching, and youngsters with hope.

Most of the teachers, schools, and students crave to be better. All are making efforts to adapt, survive, even thrive, and teachers are organizing their values and resources around new definitions of what it means to teach students who challenge them every day with extraordinary complexities. In some schools, the effort is producing profound changes in teachers' thinking and in how they carry out instruction. In others, the rhetoric of standards-based reform is faultless, but instruction barely shows any difference. In either situation, many teachers have not even bought into the rhetoric. Why, while coping with the same pressures of teaching in distressed urban schools and able to draw from extra support to do so, are teachers responding so differently?

The answer lies in the various ways districts provide environments that help teachers change and adapt. Ultimately, however, the answer is in the will of teachers, themselves.

## THE DISTRICT ROLE

One defining factor for teachers is **creative, stable, and intelligent leadership**. This means more than selecting the right people to be principals, other administrators, or even teacher leaders within schools. Good leadership shakes the cobwebs out of bureaucratic thinking and behaving. It focuses everyone on student performance and pushes for substance and integrity in what people talk about and the decisions they make. Standards-based reforms cannot dodge the leadership issue even when the problem is one of merely lackluster, not incompetent, performance.

Stability helps Long Beach move ahead steadily, while other districts are beset with changes at the top, mergers and/or catch-up pressure to change the bureaucracy as fast as the demographics of the students. Carl Cohn, the superintendent in Long Beach, has an uncanny ability to choose good leaders and support them, believing that his role is to prepare another generation of good administrators for other districts as well as Long Beach. His leadership development allows people to function in a thoughtful, collaborative and purposeful organization. Not every meeting can be productive—that would be unheard-of perfection in a bureaucracy—but the process of planning, of bringing the

best knowledge possible to the table and of organizing the work to be done stays focused on students and teachers. Members of this leadership team respect each other. Through many interviews, this writer heard no fault-finding or complaints—and, in fact, heard one comment that tells all: "This is the healthiest place I have ever worked."

The emphasis on supporting personal growth among leaders ripples down through area offices to curriculum experts, who, in turn, look for leadership among principals and teachers. There are no absolutes in this business of running schools. Not every principal is terrific nor is every teacher energized, but when people are given responsibility and support, they are more willing to be accountable. Carl Cohn also is a conservative risk-taker, carefully plucking promising future leaders out of the classroom to be part of a management team or going outside the district to find the best people for critical areas. Experienced or not, the leadership in this district accepts the role of learners.

Consistent leadership at the top helps the district survive in a state where inconsistency in policies is rampant. Moreover, those in the district office listen to teachers, recognizing when they are creating overload and willing to make adjustments in their planning. For example, after a year's experience with math portfolios as part of the district's assessment system, district leaders decided to delay the introduction of portfolios in other subject areas because the feedback from teachers indicated the process needed to slow down.

All central office leadership teams would like to work this well. Is it Cohn's charisma? Or cohesiveness and stability at the top? A traditional hard-work ethic throughout the district? A well-educated pool of teachers who stay in the district long enough to become leaders? Probably all of these. But standards-based reforms are likely to succeed in Long Beach mostly because teachers know the district's leadership team is absolutely serious about the reforms, learns from mistakes, and searches for the best professional development.

This last element—**quality professional development**—is another crucial part of creating a standards-based environment for teachers. All of the districts recognize that such challenging instruction depends on giving teachers opportunities to learn content and to practice strategies that, literally, will transform what and how students learn. Teachers can't just tack standards onto what they ordinarily do and expect their students, especially those who are low-performing, to meet higher district and state accountability measures. One teacher-leader criticized those "experts" who assure teachers that they

only need to make minor adjustments to their instruction to become standards-based. "This is a process of transformation," she said. "Increments won't work."

Urban districts, accustomed to designing their own professional development, sometimes flounder when school-site decision-making takes control of professional development and the budgets for it. Some districts have used this as an excuse to avoid remaking their professional development programs. They wring their hands over the possibility of fractured professional development options, a grab-bag of whatever appealed to individual teachers. However, in the past, district-designed professional development often was just as unfocused and subject to fads (catalogues were full of courses on computer skills and cooperative learning but short on content and strategies to teach content in diverse classrooms).

In most of the Clark sites, the districts are revamping their professional development, managing to keep it focused on standards and make it school-based in some instances. Staff development days that "belong" to the district usually are standards-oriented. Several districts spur interest in classroom-based changes through one-day conferences where the "faculty" are local teachers and administrators (this stimulates the development of networks within the districts).

If outside consultants are carefully chosen, they, too, become part of the district's overall plan for standards-based reforms. The content-based institutes in Long Beach and the long association of San Diego teachers with experts in portfolio assessments are good examples. In one instance, the consultant for a district irritated some teachers with harsh criticism of their work, but a team of teachers in one school began using what they learned from the consultant to examine student work. The grains of sand turned into a pearl. The team broke new ground, stimulating discussions by teachers around the district on how to go about launching standards-based instruction.

In fact, those districts that are honing teachers' abilities to look at student work and decide how well it reaches performance standards are engaging in professional development that will make a difference. In California, the Program Quality Review that each school must go through every three years is an opportunity for self assessment and for evaluating student work over a year's time. When combined with a district's emphasis upon standards-based reform, it can be a powerful tool for change (if the school leadership carries through).

However, if consultants only help teachers with process (teaching strategies)

rather than integrating process and content or if the consultants' expertise is not related to content—some districts invest only in importing experts on "sensitivity" training or cooperative learning—then the district's message to teachers about standards becomes mixed and muted.

The research literature is quite clear about quality professional development. It is centered on student performance, makes expertise and resources available, is consistent over time, encourages teachers to experiment and reflect, and is designed to address the needs of teachers within their particular school. Where district policies support this kind of professional development, standards-based reforms have an excellent chance of going to scale.

Often, reform-minded teachers find support for themselves *outside* of their own school environment. Districts can extend professional development through networks, electronic and otherwise, that help teachers learn from each other and conduct research together. Louisville, for example, developed subject-matter alliances for middle-school teachers, stimulated by an opportunity for them to share ideas at a summer institute.

The teachers' survey for this book reveals that many do not yet feel pulled into the reforms and that they object to unclear signals from the district. It is these teachers who usually are absent from professional development activities. Counteracting their negativism, however, is a tendency of newer teachers and those who have kept up with professional activities to buy into the reforms and to want strong professional development. Districts need to keep supporting the more receptive teachers with quality professional experiences, and principals need to encourage those willing to support reforms to take leadership roles with their colleagues. Principals in Long Beach and San Diego are helping to build a learning community, one by one, through insisting that evaluations and professional development plans be tied to standards-based teaching. On paper, this also is the mode in Minneapolis, but the contractural agreements have yet to change much classroom practice there.

A third district influence upon teachers that fosters change is **a consistent message about the importance of standards-based reforms.** Professional development is a major part of that, but a district needs to act concurrently on other components, choosing textbooks that support its standards, creating alliances with higher education institutions and their teacher preparation programs, and welcoming integration with community support efforts that will help young adolescents academically.

The district also cannot, in good conscience, insist on students' meeting higher standards unless it recognizes that some middle schools and teachers need more support than others in closing the achievement gap for their students. If they want all students to meet standards, then they need to make opportunities more equal, and the greatest equalizer is a sufficient pool of experienced, competent teachers at every school. For example, Long Beach admitted that overly stressed, low-income middle schools suffer from a lack of experienced teachers, so it has assigned four highly qualified teacher-coaches to work four days a week at one especially large and needy school as a down payment on equalizing resources.

Finally, districts need to provide teachers with **clear, standards-based assessment policies**. The heart of teachers' work always has been assessment, deciding what students should learn and then deciding if they learned it. Standards-based reforms seek to end the haphazard way this process occurs from one classroom to another so that all students have a chance to be taught optimally and to be assessed fairly. All of the Clark districts are being pushed along on this issue by statewide testing programs—the SAT-9 in California, the Minnesota Basic Standards Test, Tennessee's TerraNova standardized test, the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) and its reincarnation in 1998, and the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The surveys and conversations with many teachers show strong frustration with the emphasis upon preparing for such tests, but it is a catch-22 situation in their view. They deplore the time taken away from regular teaching, yet state accountability policies force them to drill students for the annual testing period. This is a crucial issue at the middle-grades level because individual student test results often become the major factor in high-stakes decisions, such as retention, summer school, or placement in an alternative to high school.

The testing programs are necessary for public accounting, but teachers' work cannot stop there. The results of a sampling of students in the Clark districts who were given National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test items revealed that students do rather well on basic-level items, but they fall far short when it comes to higher-level skills. State policies often create the problems. Consider that California adopted its statewide test, the SAT-9, *before* it had set standards in the subjects to be tested. Even though test-makers claim their products reflect higher standards, districts still have to match creatively their standards with cluster objectives from the

tests to show teachers that standards-based teaching *does address* the skills and knowledge covered in the state tests.

The districts help teachers recognize that performance assessments in the classroom must be linked to standards. A state test is only a snapshot of a student's knowledge and ability to use it. A district's goals under standards-based reform should be to set high goals and make sure all students meet them. Therefore, the districts that are helping teachers develop performance assessments, which requires knowing how to evaluate their students' work, push teachers beyond the influence of state testing programs and toward the district's concepts of standards.

As long as state accountability policies seem to conflict with teachers' judgments, the tension between testing and classroom practice will continue to vex those who want to see standards-based reforms take hold. Informed and competent district leadership is needed to help teachers see beyond a single test and toward high standards of performance for every student. A corollary challenge is to convince parents and the general public to accept that standards-based reporting on student achievement is as important as state test results.

## IN THE SCHOOLS

The literature on school reform often refers to the need to change a school's "culture." When visiting the Clark schools and talking to teachers and principals, it becomes obvious that there really are two cultures within most schools when there should be only one.

There is the professional culture, the one that reflects a teacher's preparation, experience, exposure to information about

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teaching matters, expectations for students, and the nature of accountability of the teacher's work. This is the culture that is overt, visible to students and parents.

The other culture is personal. It is the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that teachers exhibit in their relationships with each other and toward students. It shows up in teachers' attitudes about the capabilities of their students, their sense of responsibility for all students within their school community, their willingness to be honest and cooperative with other teachers, and in how they integrate their personal beliefs with teacher union priorities. For some teachers working under some contracts, anything extra required of them is a union matter; for others, time is a professional commodity. This personal culture reveals itself in ways that people outside of the school may never see—how teachers deal with the details of everyday existence such as the death of a colleague or a colleague's spouse, for example; or how the number of years until retirement affect a teacher's willingness to change practice; or if a teacher acquiesces to traditional authority within a school, playing a passive role.

Thomas Sergiovanni, a researcher who writes frequently about building community within schools, points out that there is a tendency to view schools only as formal organizations. Life in an organization and life in a community are very different from each other, he notes, and he prefers schools as community where people collaborate and have a shared sense of responsibility for all students.

The Clark schools that can build a community around professionalism—those schools that bring the two cultures together—are the most capable of making the changes necessary for standards-based reforms. People's personal beliefs and behavior must match their professional commitment. At Noe Middle School in Louisville, for example, teachers took the development of the school's improvement plans seriously, using the process to set school and personal goals. They work together to monitor and plan progress for every student in a school with a mixture of magnet and neighborhood students, as well as the largest language minority enrollment in any Kentucky middle school. Like the comment about working in the Long Beach central office, this is a "healthy" context for teachers (and students).

Penny O'Toole, principal of Marshall Middle School in Long Beach, runs a tight ship, one totally on course toward higher student achievement through standards-based teaching. Like other principals in the district, she is attempting to move from "supervising teaching to supervising learning," a process that includes lots of attention to teachers

working together to evaluate student work, plenty of professional development, and a "can-do" spirit among teachers. Not an easy school to teach in—Marshall has about 40 percent limited-English students and a majority from low-income families—but O'Toole and the teachers have pulled the school up in student achievement and come together on its goals. Once beset by high turnover among teachers, it now has a waiting list.

The changes at Marshall happened in stages. A former principal started by asking teachers to collect examples of student work and discuss them, but it was obvious that teachers needed a better grounding in the content standards. Key teachers attended the content-based institutes, and some did even more than the institutes. History teacher Francine Curtis, at Marshall for eight years until 1998 when she became an area coach, embraced standards-based instruction because it fits with her personal beliefs. Committed to equity for all students, she used the history standards for her seventh graders to explore, among other things, value judgments about "primitive" societies and discussions of citizenship that led to the creation of Diversity Ambassadors who do peer mediation and promote respect for others. In the past, she noted, minority and low-income middle-school students often were told they couldn't meet standards and were given papers to color. "That made my blood boil," she says. "All kids can do good work, but a teacher must scaffold instruction, building on what students know, to make it happen." At Marshall, she notes, "teachers don't close the doors on students anymore."

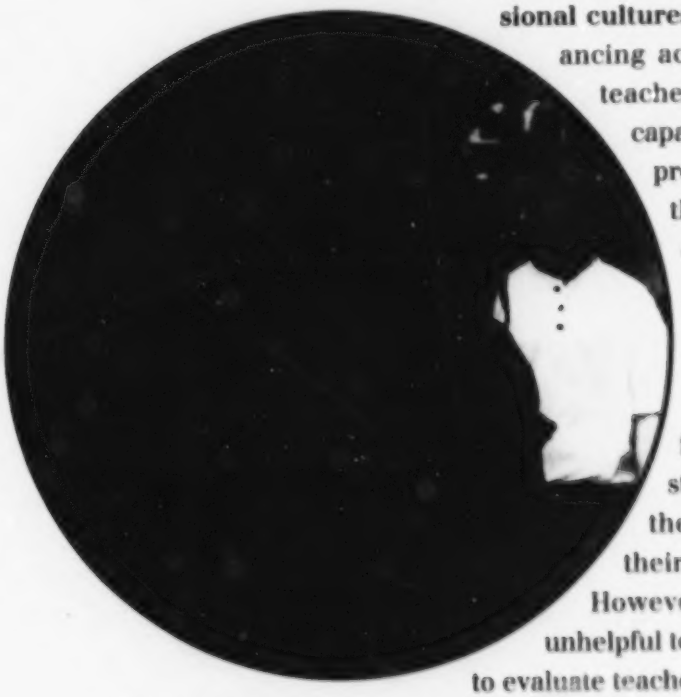
At East Lake Middle School in Chattanooga, a personal culture clashed with professional expectations. Collaboration couldn't find a hold among the staff. For example, teachers turned a writing prompt from the district that asked students to write about their favorite teacher into a competition among themselves. While the principal insisted on standards, his leadership style, typical of a traditional emphasis upon running an "organization," couldn't create a democratic community where people wanted to collaborate and participate in deep discussions about student work.

Even when cohesion and focus exist within a middle school, deep-seated habits about the middle-school organization can create barriers. Tom Carnes' situation at Pershing Middle School in San Diego is a case in point. Drawn to transfer to the school because he could become history department chair, he found it a hollow assignment. Of the 12 teachers at the school with history classes, only one other besides Carnes is full-time. Other history assignments are filled by sixth-grade core teachers (doubling up

with language arts) or other teachers with only one or two history classes. Carnes himself has five preparations a day—for advanced seventh and eighth grades, regular seventh and eighth grades, and an advisory group. Too many preps contributes to this experienced teacher's feeling that he is not "doing a good job."

It is easy to say that standards-based reform requires the school culture to become that of a learning community. Within schools with large numbers of poor and/or minority students, the difficulty of doing this becomes apparent when one realizes that the professional culture of the school must be strong enough to affect the personal culture, changing teachers' attitudes as well as teachers' work.

To do this, teachers need a school environment where:



**The principal knows how to unify the personal and professional cultures within his/her school.** This is a balancing act because there is a skill in moving teachers' personal attitudes about students' capabilities along at the same pace as their professional growth. One would hope that the latter stimulates the former. However, that is not always true unless the principal realizes the reforms will not happen until teachers truly believe they should happen for all students.

**The principal knows how to focus on learning, not teaching.** That's stretching many principals far beyond the management skills emphasized in their administrator preparation programs. However, it would be unfair to teachers and unhelpful to standards-based reforms for principals to evaluate teachers and to be involved in designing their professional development unless they, too, know what learning-to-standards means.

**Teachers have sufficient peer support.** Perhaps the most frustrated teachers of all in schools serving large numbers of low-performing students are those who have significant professional skills and a commitment to students but who feel abandoned. A small number of them usually carry the load for tasks within the school that need to be

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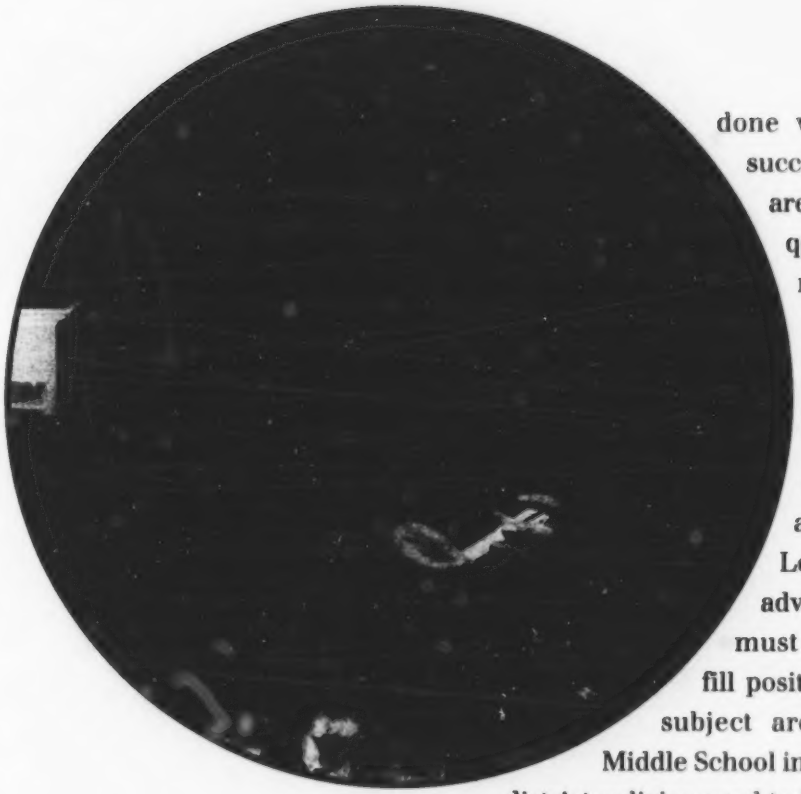

done well. Their efforts and successes with students often are not duplicated in subsequent grades. Their work may not be honored among their own colleagues, and they burn out. Schools that can build a like-minded faculty over the years, such as Noe Middle School in Louisville, have a distinct advantage over schools that must scramble each year to fill positions, especially in some subject areas, as does Stephens Middle School in Long Beach. School and district policies need to help these lonely professionals. Incentives for experienced teachers to transfer to stressed schools and help build a larger core, strong mentoring programs that capitalize on the energy and up-to-date preparation of beginning teachers, principal leadership that recognizes good teaching and is willing to be tough with teachers who are lagging behind—all of these actions could improve the climate for teaching and learning.

**The school and the district are in sync.** Before districts adopted standards-based reforms for all schools, the conventional wisdom among teachers was to respect those principals who kept the district at bay. They were the buffer between teachers and the district's burdensome, inflexible regulations. In the current environment within the Clark districts, that would be a destructive course. With the tenuous acceptance of changing to standards-based teaching among many teachers, the line running from school district policies, through central office operations, and to school and classroom practices must be straight-arrow. This means that district offices must be good at listening to feedback, and schools must be coherent about what works for them and what needs improvement—and must be able to convey that up the line.

## IN THE CLASSROOM

The adversities experienced by middle-grades teachers in schools with large numbers of minority and/or poor students cannot be minimized. Yet almost every problem finds hope for a solution in standards-based reforms. Principals and teachers report that standards mean students entering the middle grades are better prepared than previously (in all of the districts, the reforms affect all grades, not just those in the middle). District and school support for improving literacy skills makes it possible for more students to meet higher academic standards. The standards reforms can bring a sense of common exposure to the curriculum and common assessment to students who move from one school to another. In the past, this student turnover interrupted teachers' control over what happened in their classrooms and undoubtedly made it so difficult to create an environment for learning that many teachers settled for the minimum. It may be several years before the curriculum and grading policies reflect the standards district-wide in these six districts, but the framework is in place. No matter how much they move around, students should experience the same curriculum and expectations.

Despite the many ways students benefit from standards-based reforms, the teachers' survey reveals uneven commitment to student success. Why is it that some teachers, like those profiled in this book, see how the reforms can help students achieve and enthusiastically try to learn as much as they can while others in their districts don't make the same efforts? Why is it that when professional development opportunities are offered to all teachers, the usual "regulars" are the ones who show up? The ones who really need to be there, most of the time, aren't. Why is it that many teachers with a preponderance of failing students are reluctant to analyze their teaching strategies but quick to blame students themselves? Why do some teachers believe their standards are high enough even though their students do poorly on external measures of performance? All of these observations reflect personal values and beliefs that do not seem to be, frankly, professional.

Every profession has its stars. However, most professions also require a minimum standard of skill and success of its practitioners with clients or patients. Every profession also is undergoing profound change because of the growth of knowledge, use of technology or other compelling forces. Similarly, teachers' basic professional obligations should be to find out what they don't know, constantly to want to improve their practice, and to work with colleagues on gaining greater success for their students.

To be blunt, the middle-grades teachers in the Clark districts have no excuses for not being professional. Consider their advantages:

- **Strong professional development opportunities.** While the survey responses indicate many teachers believe they are not getting the professional development they need, the resources within districts are rather impressive. If what is available does not suit the needs of teachers or schools, there are avenues for teachers to speak their mind and shape how the resources available through the Clark project could best be used.

- **Networks with other teachers.** Every core subject teacher, and most elective teachers, can contact professional associations in their fields that have produced sets of standards and offer professional development. As does anyone who considers themselves a professional, teachers ought to invest in their own growth. Furthermore, most of the Clark districts have established local networks, discussion groups, research projects, and other ways for teachers to connect with each other and share best practices.

- **School-based decision-making.** Every school in each Clark district has some form of school-site autonomy that can be used for much more than planning field trips. If time is a barrier to enhanced learning, then teachers have the power to change schedules around to accommodate, for example, blocks of greater time in core subjects or team planning times. For teachers willing to do the research, there are many creative examples to draw from. Teachers can use their authority to design and implement professional development. They can collectively reach out to their school's community to garner the support students need, such as after-school programs or parent involvement programs. If too much in-school time is taken up with tasks not related to students and instruction, as the teachers indicated in the survey, then they can collaboratively take actions to change that, if they wish.

Perhaps that phrase "if they wish" holds more power than any other aspect of school reform. So much of the rhetoric about the critical importance of teachers' work to standards-based instruction takes the initiative away from teachers. Researchers and reformers prefer to focus on the external barriers teachers face when the most significant barrier might be the commitment of teachers themselves. Like their students, almost all have the potential to be successful in their classrooms. The reforms occurring around standards give them specific goals, provide stability, and bring them extra support, like their students. Teachers will shape their instruction as best suits them—no one is asking for dull conformity. But the message of standards-based reforms is that teachers must give all students the best possible opportunities to learn and grow. That means, of course, that teachers must thrive as learners, just like their students. And, like their students, they will figure out that effort brings success.

> *". . . the desert, the dry and sun-lashed desert, is a good school in which to observe the cleverness and the infinite variety of techniques of survival under pitiless opposition. Life could not change the sun or water the desert, so it changed itself... The desert has mothered magic things."*
>
> —John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley*

*"I can't quit now. I haven't figured it all out."*

—**Judy Lyons**, sixth-grade language arts teacher

East Lake Middle School, Chattanooga, Tennessee

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